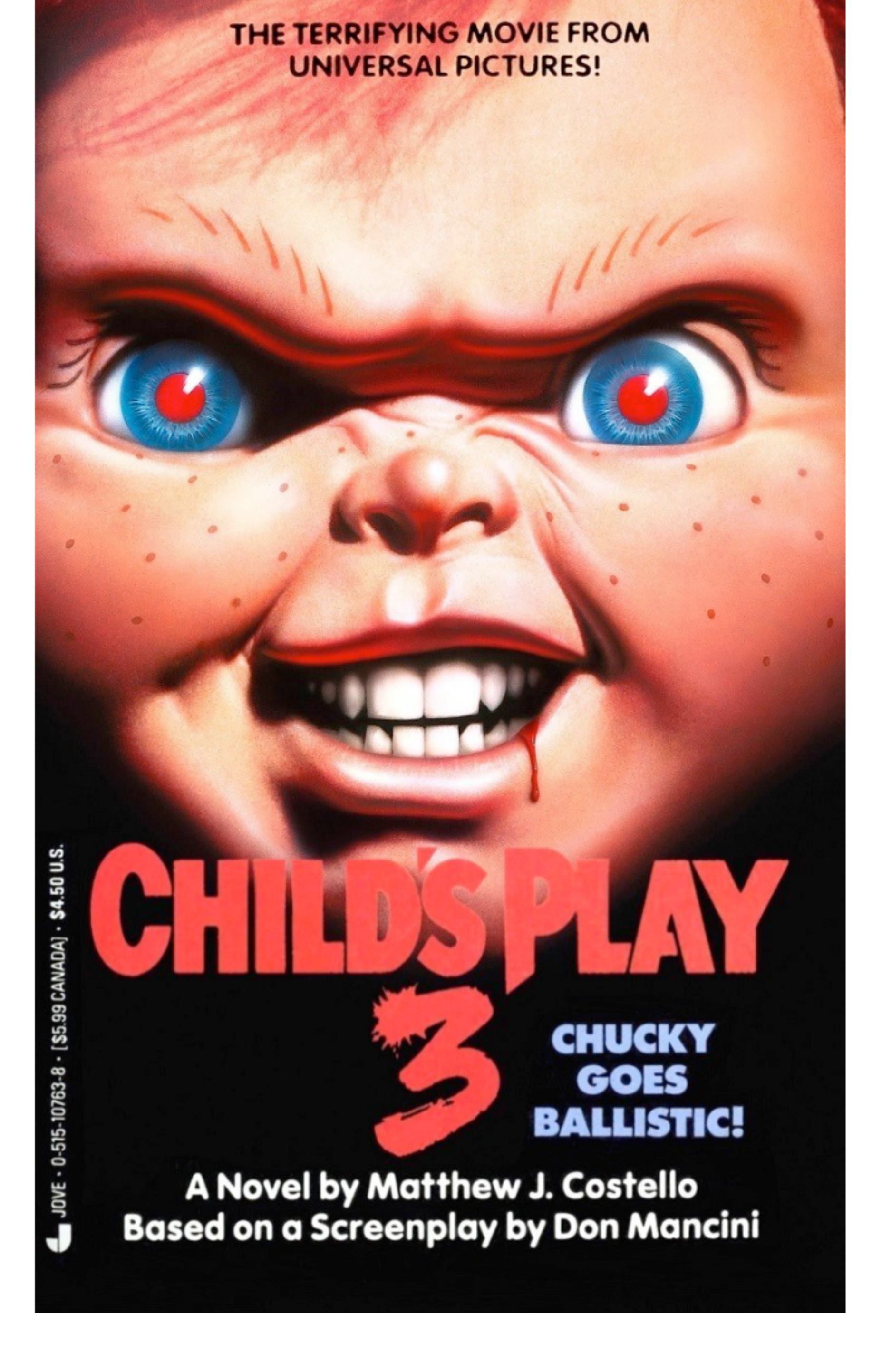

THE TERRIFYING MOVIE FROM
UNIVERSAL PICTURES!
CHILD'S PLAY
3
CHUCKY
GOES
BALLISTIC!
A Novel by Matthew J. Costello
Based on a Screenplay by Don Mancini
JOVE · 0-515-10763-8 · [$5.99 CANADA] · $4.50 U.S.

Andy had a little doll,
   Its heart was black as coal.
And everywhere that Andy went,
   It tried to steal his soul.

It followed him to school one day.
   It's haunting Andy's life.
It makes the children scream in fear
   'Cause Chucky's got a knife.

CHILD'S PLAY 3

NO MORE FUN AND GAMES.

CHILD'S PLAY 3

A Novel by Matthew J. Costello
Based on a Screenplay by Don Mancini



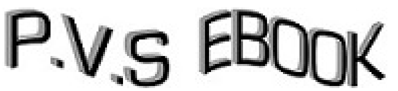
JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

CHILD'S PLAY 3
A Jove Book / published by arrangement with
MCA Publishing Rights, a Division of MCA. Inc.

PRINTING HISTORY
Jove edition / September 1991

ISBN 0-515-10763-8

Jove Books are published by The Berkley Publishing Group. 200 Madison Avenue. New York. New York 10016.
The name "JOVE" and the "J" logo are trademarks belonging to Jove Publications, Inc.



PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CHILD'S PLAY 3

1

The rat stuck its head out through the hole in the wall.

It sniffed the air, alert to any warning of potential danger.

After a moment's hesitation, a moment when its long gray white whiskers twitched in the darkness, the rat scuttled out, waddling, sticking close to the wall.

There were a number of things it searched for.

It wanted water.

There were small puddles of water with a bitter taste in here. But they could still slake the animal's thirst.

And tonight, like most nights, something else drove the rat.

Tonight it was hungry. It had chewed glue and plastic and scraps of wire. All the crumbs from ancient lunches had been found and devoured long ago.

Now, this was one hungry rat in a place devoid of anything to eat. Its hunger forced it to leave its comfortable warren of holes and rat-sized corridors.

Tonight, it waddled up to a great rubber path that ran through the building. It climbed up, smelling the machine oil, the rubber of the dormant, cracked conveyor belt.

The rat is watched up here.

They look at it.

The dolls all looked the same, bald and eyeless, staring out into the darkness. The rat didn't look at them as it scurried past.

The rat had chewed on one of the dolls once, but the taste wasn't good. It had swallowed the plastic. And later, back in its hole it had felt pain.

Some things can make even a rat sick.

The conveyor belt turned to the left.

Usually the rat climbed down to the stone floor at this point and made its way through the factory. But tonight it hesitated. The rat looked up and sniffed the air. The skin around its teeth, thin and pinkish, was pulled back from its teeth. It was so eager to eat, to chew something.

The rat sniffed the air. Its blackish nostrils flared while it brought its tail around, close to its body.

It sensed something.

Something different tonight.

So the rat didn't get down. It stayed on the conveyor belt and kept waddling along the rubber highway, past the dolls who didn't bother to look at it.

But the rat didn't find anything, except the end of the conveyor belt.

It raised its head one more time. Fooled. By hunger, by desperation. The intrigued rat turned. Carefully—not an easy thing—it climbed off the belt, slipping, stepping on parts of the machinery. Slipping, squealing—

Until it lost its perch and tumbled to the stone floor.

It made a small squeak.

Unheard in the cavernous room.

The rat got up quickly—as if something might pounce on it. And when it did, it saw something.

A mound of melted plastic the same color as the eyeless dolls.

With something sticking out.

Hunger drove the rat closer to the mound, close to a small arm sticking out of it. The rat raised its head and sniffed at the arm imbedded in the plastic.

It chewed the arm, tasting the same taste that had made it sick once before.

The rat backed away, losing interest.

But then the rat stopped. It looked at the mound of shapeless plastic. It came closer, whiskers twitching, black nostrils flaring. Sensing something. The rat definitely smelled something. It looked left and right.

It look a few more steps, slower still.

It moved right next to the base of the mound. The rat's whiskers touched the base. The rat moved closer, and chewed.

The rat gnawed at the mound, tasting nothing, nothing except that plastic. But—in the air—there was something . . .

It tore at the plastic, the way it used to tear at the plastic covering of the half-eaten sandwiches left by the workers. It grew excited as it chewed, squeaking.

The smell grew stronger.

The rat locked its eyes on the spot it chewed.

Then, the smell grew even stronger.

But the taste remained cold and foul.

The rat chewed, driven by hunger. Until it felt one of its fangs bite down, and then through, into the plastic.

There was a hole, a cavity.

And something bubbled up out of that hole. The rat's tongue pushed into plastic, lapping at the liquid.

The taste was wonderful.

Once the rat had come upon a dead animal—a prize—and it chewed the animal, ripping away the skin, the fur, tasting the liquid underneath.

Now, from the plastic mound, blood began to flow. The rat chewed more, making the hole larger, and so much blood gushed out of the gnawed hole that it sprayed the rat. The rat squeaked, frenzied by the taste, the food. Chewing to get at the meat below.

But there was no meat, no skin.

And the more the rat chewed, the more the blood flowed out, at first a trickle, then a steady stream, shooting out, onto the floor.

The blood formed a stream that flowed into a drainage groove cut into the stone floor.

The rat chewed on, oblivious of the stream and oblivious of the sounds of the blood shooting out. The red river flowed down the groove, racing toward a drainage hole in the floor.

It flowed into the mouth of a pipe that directed the blood downward.

The rat didn't hear the weird, wrenching sound of the blood flowing through the pipe. A metal throat choking on blood red bile.

And no one heard the other groaning noise the pipe made.

A crazy rattling noise as the blood flowed through the pipe, gaining speed, hurrying, hurrying . . .

The blood rushed on to the end of the broken pipe, which jutted out into space over the conveyor belt. Over one of the doll heads—eyeless, bald.

The head was at peace, its dark sockets looking out, unconcerned.

And then the stream rushed out, gushing down onto the head, spraying it with the blood. The blood hit the doll's head and then spread down its bland face, forming a hundred tiny streams, seeping into the creases of the plastic head, gathering at the empty eye sockets, filling them.

It coursed down into the open mouth.

Then . . .

There was movement. Not just from the blood anymore, not just the spray of red, running off the glossy plastic.

The head *moved.*

Slowly, imperceptibly. As if a tremendous effort were involved. As if

this were *so* hard to do, a movement almost forgotten.

The eye sockets twitched. And the mouth closed, gummy, as if tasting the blood. Then the mouth opened. It closed again, and then opened.

The doll's eye sockets, still black, moved as if they could see.

But now the face, slowly animated, took on something more than just these dull experimental twitches.

With movement comes memory.

And the eye sockets narrowed until they were angry slits.

The smiley, chubby-cheeked mouth turned down, forming a sneer filled with rage.

The twisted mouth opened.

Still unable to talk, to scream.

A dark cavernous pit.

Alive. Waiting.

Hungry . . .

2

Sullivan nodded to Dr. Patterson to continue. The room was dark except for the light bouncing off the movie screen. He looked at his executives watching the child psychologist.

As CEO of Play Pals, Sullivan had already decided what he was going to do—regardless of what Patterson, the corporate child psychologist, said.

Still, there were the niceties to be observed, recommendations to be considered carefully. A toy company must be responsible . . . and responsive. After all, Sullivan thought, the Play Pals Toy Company had gotten some bad press, some very bad press.

Press that nearly blew the damn company out of the water.

Although eight years had gone by since that crazy business with Andy Barclay and his Good Guy doll, Sullivan knew that he had better tread carefully.

Patterson looked at him, waiting for his attention.

“Mr. Sullivan . . .”

There was a click, and then Sullivan was looking at the slide of Andy Barclay. Not one of his favorite things to took at.

Crazy boy, crazy mother, and all that stuff about the doll—nearly destroyed his business.

Sullivan played with his pen. Eager to end this, to move on. At the sight of the famous Andy Barclay, Sullivan sensed all his executives moving around in their seats.

That boy causes fiscal discomfort, he thought.

“This—as you know—is Andy Barclay . . . eight years ago. He claimed that his Good Guy doll was possessed—”

“Rubbish,” Sullivan muttered.

“Er, possessed by Charles Lee Ray—the Lakeshore Strangler. The scandal he set off nearly destroyed Play Pals.”

Sullivan heard another click and a most unpleasant looking man replaced the cute, smiling face of Andy Barclay. It was a picture of Charles Lee Ray, dead over eight years. And still he’s messing up my company, Sullivan thought.

Will wonders never cease?

“And I have to raise this point,” Patterson said. “I have to ask if it’s worth the potential damage to the corporation to revive all of *this* by

reissuing the Good Guy doll? Whatever the gain to our market share, any extra profits are surely outweighed by the potential damage of reminding everyone of what happened."

There was more stirring in the seats of these well-paid executives.

Not exactly a bunch of risk takers, Sullivan thought. They would just as soon keep profits at the status quo. Don't make waves . . .

They are forgetting just how really big the Good Guy doll was. Do they remember how well the doll sold? And the accessories, the licensing arrangements, the TV show, the money?

We do okay now, Sullivan thought. But the Good Guy doll was a damn *bonanza.*

Patterson shut off the projector and automatically the shades on the window went up. Brilliant sunlight poured in.

Sullivan watched his top execs squinting. Time to shed some light on this subject, Sullivan thought. He sat in his chair, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. As if saying, see . . . I'm thinking this over very carefully. This isn't something to rush into.

Elaine Wilcox, very pretty and the best CPA in the company, turned to him. She was wonderful at masking any interest in him when anyone else was around.

A real pro . . .

She was there, ready to say what he wanted to say.

"Mr. Sullivan—" She laughed. "I'm sorry, but before this happened, didn't the Good Guy doll outsell all of our other items two to one?"

"Three to one," Sullivan corrected, hammering the point home.

"Exactly. And enough time has gone by to make this boy's fantasy ancient history."

More stirring by the other execs. But they were also wary, Sullivan guessed. No one wanted to come down on the wrong side of the argument. Let them sniff the wind. Figure out which way we are going with this particular ball.

Sullivan nodded.

Elaine looked around the table. "The factory is up and running, the market studies indicate there will be a big reaction when we reintroduce the doll—"

On cue, she turned back to Sullivan.

"We can be back in the stores with the Good Guy in two weeks. Licensing and accessories would kick in shortly after that. The bottom line, Mr. Sullivan, is that we shouldn't let the disturbed fantasies of one small boy influence corporate policy."

More stirring. Fannies wiggling around in the seats. No question

about the direction the wind is blowing now, is there, boys?

Except Dr. Miles Patterson still has something more to say.

"What if . . ." he said, too loudly.

The fellow's nervous. Excitable, thought Sullivan. Maybe he needs a little vacation. I'll have to talk to him later.

"What if you make the new dolls, and—and they affect some other little boy the same way. It would be worse than another public relations disaster, much worse. This time it would destroy the company."

Sullivan nodded. It was time to take the direct approach. He felt his execs looking at him. Wondering how he would answer the question.

Sullivan looked up at Patterson and smiled. He took his hands and locked them behind his head. Stretched back, relaxed. Just talking to the troops.

"You know, one of the hardest things to accept about this business is that it is—" Sullivan paused "—a *business.* And in any business, whether you're selling toys, cars, or nuclear weapons, the bottom line is the *bottom line.* We exist to make a profit for our stockholders. They trust us to do that. And to do that, we have to sell to our consumers."

Sullivan sniffed the air. Time to wrap this up. Especially since the decision was a foregone conclusion. He was merely observing the niceties.

"And our consumers are children. And children want the Good Guy doll. Damn, they deserve the Good Guy doll. It's a good toy, a fun toy. And no whacked-out kid should spoil it for all the rest of the children."

"But—" Patterson started to say.

Sullivan stood up.

"Now, Miles, I understand your concern. I appreciate the thought that you've given this matter. But I've made up my mind—and I think that we're all in agreement . . ."

A brief pause while he scanned the quiet table.

"We're moving ahead with the Good Guy doll."

Patterson shrunk back.

Sullivan turned to the table of executives. "Thank you, everyone, for coming. And let's have a great year."

The executives stood up, eager to hustle back to their own offices, ready to do their part to make the Good Guy bigger than ever.

And it will be, thought Sullivan.

No question about it.

But then Patterson came up to him. Obviously a man who can't feel

which way the wind is blowing.

“Mr. Sullivan, if there’s nothing I can say to convince you that—”

“There isn’t.”

“Then I must go on record with my position. I’m totally against this.”

Sullivan smiled. The executives watched him.

Scratch the vacation. In fact, he thought, scratch Patterson. Who said we need a child psychologist on staff? Certainly not one as opinionated and wrongheaded as Patterson. Maybe he will enjoy unemployment.

“Don’t worry, Miles. Your position is crystal clear. You can be sure I won’t forget.”

Patterson’s mouth opened.

Hello. Good morning. Wake up and smell the coffee.

Finally Patterson got the message. He backed up, to his slides, his notes.

By lunchtime tomorrow he would be history, Sullivan thought. The CEO felt someone watching him from the table.

Ira Petzoid, his personal assistant. Now, here was a man who knows what makes a business run. Petzoid waited until Patterson slunk out of the office. He did nothing to hide his grin.

Patterson shut the door behind him.

Petzoid jumped up, grinning. The other executives beamed.

“Mr. Sullivan, we’ve arranged a little surprise for you.”

Sullivan looked at the man, so eager to please, so adept at his toadying that he was truly a man born to his role.

“And what might that be?”

Petzoid put up his hand, grinned, and then bent down awkwardly, reaching under the giant conference table.

“Ah, here we are. The guys at the factory sent this over. We all wanted you to have it.”

Sullivan saw the box first. The familiar splash of red and yellow. The giant bubble letters. The box, almost identical to the original.

“Fresh off the assembly line, Mr. Sullivan.”

Petzoid handed the box to Sullivan. And when Sullivan took it everyone applauded. Sullivan looked at the doll, which was identical to the original Good Guy. In fact, thousands of old parts were ready to be used, covered with a fresh coating of plastic skin. The molds in the factory were all set.

“Why, thank you,” Sullivan said, looking around. “Thank you very much.”

Petzoid grinned and nodded, so pleased with his little coup.

“The first Good Guy of the nineties!” Petzoid said.

And the executives applauded even louder.

3

Inside the box, the doll moved his eyes—just a bit. A fraction of an inch, a micromillimeter. Just to see the men clapping. The fancy office, the great desk.

Thinking: It's so hard.

Yes, to stay here, inside this box, looking out.

So very difficult.

How long has it been? How long was I nowhere, nothing? How long was my consciousness buried under that plastic? How much time?

He felt joy now.

Why, I've been reborn. I'm back from the damn grave. I'm new, fresh—better than ever.

And I can do what I have to.

He felt himself, then, being tossed through the air, landing on the table, looking up at the zillion tiny dots on the ceiling.

How long has it been? Charles Lee Ray wondered. Mighty Damballa, tell me. How long?

And where is he?

Where is Andy Barclay? Where is the damn brat who did this to me?

Answer my prayers.

He looked at the ceiling. And waited.

Patience. And time. This time I must plan better.

I've been given a second chance. Just—

Due, Damballa!

Help me to find him. Help me find Andy Barclay.

4

The string of Sullivan's Good Guy yo-yo became tangled. The yo-yo didn't unwind as smoothly as it should, and Sullivan reminded himself to send out a memo in the morning. Check the yo-yos.

We're not some Taiwanese sweatshop. We don't produce junk.

He wound the yo-yo up again, and now it spun smoothly.

Sullivan made the yo-yo spin up and down as he looked out the window. He could see Lakeshore Drive and the glittering skyscrapers of Chicago. Most of the office buildings were half lit. Other people staying late, working hard . . . just like me.

The American Dream.

Put your ass in gear and keep it there.

Or your neighbor will run away with your golden goose.

He sent the yo-yo down again, trying for a trick he hadn't done in decades.

Walking the dog.

But the yo-yo lost its spin too quickly.

"Damn," Sullivan said to himself. We make dolls that get weird . . . and a yo-yo that can't cut the mustard.

He turned to the computer terminal where Petzoid was tapping at the keyboard, a monkey playing with his new toy. Making Petzoid computer literate is a major achievement. His forte was getting coffee.

Behind Petzoid was a wall of yo-yos, trains, battery-operated soldiers programmed to march and shoot. And Good Guy toys, some old, some new, everything from lunch boxes and pajamas to toy tool kits and the Good Guy video game—all whipped off store shelves immediately after the "incident."

A cornucopia of Good Guy goodies, ready to roll off the production line.

Petzoid said, "Ah," Then he sat back and turned to Sullivan.

"There, Mr. Sullivan. Got your schedule for tomorrow right here. You have breakfast at eight with the cereal people. They're *very* interested. Then breakfast at nine with your lawyer, breakfast at ten with the union rep, lunch with your wife—"

Sullivan shook his head. "I thought we canceled that."

Petzoid leaned forward, studying the screen. "Oh. Yeah, that's right." Petzoid hit a key and removed the event.

Sullivan, listening, walked to the window, a wall of black dotted with the stariike glow from the office windows and streetlights. I could live here, Sullivan thought. Who needs a home—when you have all this?

"The board meeting's from two to five. Your hair treatment's at five-thirty, and the chiropractor's at six." Petzoid paused. "How's your back today, Mr. Sullivan?"

He hated it when Petzoid tried to get personal.

"Don't ask," Sullivan said, looking out the window, down at the miniaturized people on the street, tiny toy people darting around.

He heard Petzoid hit some keys, then the click as he shut the computer off. Sullivan gave the yo-yo another spin, but it cantilevered left and right, out of control.

Petzoid stood beside him. And he had the Good Guy doll under his arm.

It was night. Just me and Petzoid, he thought. But Dr. Patterson's warning hung in the room. Something foul and smelly. Ruining my pleasure, Sullivan thought.

And it made him think.

Where is Andy Barclay? Is he out there? Whatever happened to the poor boy? Is he still having Good Guy nightmares? And his dear mother—did they ever release her from the mental home? She was a worse case than the son.

Pathetic people.

They nearly destroyed Play Pals.

Petzoid stood beside him, as if he were a peer. Sullivan shook his head. At least it was someone to talk to.

"You know, Petzoid, the Barclay boy just turned sixteen. He's not a little boy anymore."

"Yes, sir. I updated his file myself. I've been following—"

Sullivan nodded. "Well, I want to *dump* that file, Petzoid. Personally." He turned to his toady. "Put this thing behind us."

Petzoid nodded. "Yes, sir."

Sullivan smiled and then walked back to the terminal. He turned on the computer, but the screen was a blur. Sullivan dug out his reading glasses and put them on. From this terminal, Sullivan could reach the central files of the entire company, a list of branch offices, the entire worldwide Play Pals network.

Sullivan hit some keys and brought up the menu called Personal Records. Another key brought a list of names, departments. Barclay, mom and son, were under the heading Good Guy Doll. He got the file.

"Mr. Sullivan . . ." Petzoid walked close to him, holding the boxed doll under his arm. "Er, where do you want this?"

Sullivan waved a hand in the air. "Just throw it anywhere."

Petzoid threw the box, and Sullivan heard it land on the floor.

* * *

The world spun around. The lights, the dots on the ceiling, the blackness outside, all spinning, until Chucky inside his box landed hard on the floor.

But there's no pain.

That was always the great thing.

No pain.

Not right away.

No. The feelings, the sensations took time to penetrate through the layers of plastic and metal, transforming his doll body into something living.

If the process is ever completed, I'll be trapped forever, Chucky thought.

Chucky moved his doll fingers. He closed them, just a bit, just enough to be sure that he had control, that he could move his body.

Then he stretched the fingers out.

Okay. We're in business, he thought.

But the damn meter is running.

Then he thought of what the fat cat, Sullivan, had said. Andy Barclay was sixteen. Amazing . . . Well, is that a problem? Will it still work? I can still swap bodies with him now, can't I?

There were still things about his transformation that Chucky didn't understand.

He let his chubby-cheeked smile go, relaxing his face, letting the contours of his face fall into a more natural state. There, he thought, feeling the comfortable sneer. That's better.

Chucky listened, and waited, while the two men talked.

Sullivan highlighted File—Andy Barclay, and then he hit the Enter key.

He skimmed the file.

Petzoid cleared his throat.

"Well, Mr. Sullivan . . . if there's nothing else. I'm gonna get along."

Sullivan turned and looked at Petzoid. "Fine." He did nothing to hide the disapproving tone in his voice.

"Er, it's just that my wife, she's expecting me." Petzoid smiled. "It's our anniversary."

How quaint.

Sullivan stood up. "Fine, Petzoid. Wonderful. But remember, look out the window at all the office lights still on. There's always someone, somewhere who's working just a few minutes later than you." Sullivan put a hand on Petzoid's shoulder and gave it an unfriendly squeeze.

Petzoid gulped, an audible sound in the quiet room.

Sullivan let his hand fall and then said: "Think about it."

Petzoid nodded. He backed up, scooping up his papers from the desk. "Yes, sir, I guess it's not too late. I guess I could bring something home—" Petzoid looked down at his papers.

Times are tough. Unemployment is up. These are great days for the employer, Sullivan thought.

"I guess I could look over the Larrabee report after dinner." Petzoid kept backing up. "Yes, I'll do that." He was at the door. "Good night, Mr. Sullivan."

Sullivan turned away. "Good night."

Sullivan heard the door shut. And now he was alone. A bit of an adjustment, not having someone to hop and skip to his every whim. But only a bit.

He looked out the window, rubbing his chin. There were things he could do, other meetings to be set up. So much to see to, so that the Good Guy launch goes smoothly, and . . .

He thought of something. He wanted the earnings report before his breakfast meetings. He needed to prove to the cereal people that Good Guy cereal would leap off the shelves, that it was worth every damn penny he was going to squeeze out of them. Sullivan tapped the Escape key, and the main menu came back.

Petzoid had that report. He probably was already back at his office, maybe leaving the building.

Sullivan ran to his door, opened it and called out: "Petzoid, wait!" He looked out, into the dark offices, the maze of cubicles, the other executives' offices, the computer terminals, dark, sleeping. He heard something . . .

The heavy whoosh of the elevator door shutting.

"Petzoid?"

There was no answer.

Damn, thought Sullivan. He turned and went back into his office, shutting the door behind him.

It was quiet. Too quiet, so Sullivan picked up the remote from the small coffee table in his office and turned on the television. It came on softly, inaudible. Sullivan used the remote to raise the volume before putting it down. The *MacNeil-Lehrer* report was on. Sullivan listened. Some congressman was wringing his hands about the country's new militarism.

Poor baby.

Sullivan went to his liquor cabinet and poured himself a scotch. He opened the small refrigerator hidden in the wall and dug out ice cubes.

He took a sip, feeling warm and safe in his corporate cocoon. The scotch tasted wonderful, burning his tongue, the back of his throat. He swirled the ice cubes around.

He turned back to the TV. The cry-baby congressman was off and Jim Lehrer was giving the financial report. Figures came on the screen. The Dow Industrials were way up. Sullivan nodded. The economy was moving again. Maybe the nineties weren't going to be so nasty after all.

He walked to a bank of switches on the wall and hit a button, lowering his office lights to a gentle glow, bordering on darkness. Then Sullivan took his drink to the window, swirling the cubes around, sipping it, the TV droning on soothingly in the background.

He heard nothing else.

Until the TV went off.

There was a small click. And then the TV went off.

Sullivan wondered: Is it a power failure? No. The lights are on. Maybe the TV is broken. Brand new set, a Sony thirty-one-inch, state-of-the-art. It couldn't be broken.

He walked back to the coffee table to retrieve the remote. It wasn't there. His drink felt cold in his hand. Icy cold.

It must have fallen on the floor, he thought. Sure, the remote must have fallen and . . .

Sullivan got down on his knees, the drink rattling in his hand. He didn't see the remote, not at first. But then he saw its dark outline on the other side of the table, lying on the floor.

He thought: How the heck did it get there? Like someone dropped it or kicked it.

Sullivan reached under the table. His fingers stretching toward the remote, his head leaning down, almost under the table, his back twisted in a funny way, and he groaned.

Oh, I'll pay for that. It felt like someone had jabbed a spike into his spine.

He stretched another few inches and finally felt the remote.

"Gotcha," he said, pulling it back.

He stood up, turning to the TV, taking a step.

Then he heard the sound. A clicking sound that struck him as vaguely familiar. Something was clicking; then he heard a rolling sound. He took a step, not looking down, not seeing . . .

Hit feet slid out from underneath him. His arms flew out as he desperately tried to regain his balance. He looked like he was trying to fly.

Only then did Sullivan get a quick glimpse of marbles, dozens of marbles rolling toward him, bouncing together, rolling under his feet.

Sullivan went flying into the air, arms flapping. The remote—was it really so important to get that remote? he thought—went flying from his right hand, the drink glass flying from the other.

He smacked down onto the floor, marbles pressing against his back. He heard a dull thud—the sound of his head smacking against the floor.

A tidal wave, a tsunami of pain crashed over him.

He moaned.

He heard his drink glass smash against the wall, the expensive crystal shattering.

Sullivan lay there, moaning, breathing heavily.

Then he heard a police siren. A tiny police siren, coming right at him.

He turned his head and saw a remote-control police car, its toy wheels burning rubber, coming right toward his head.

Just a toy, he thought.

No real danger, but it would hurt, smashing against my face. He sat up, twisting his back, driving another painful spike into his back.

The police car pushed past him, bouncing on the marbles, out of control.

Sullivan heard more noises, giving him no time to think, to wonder what's going on here? Damn, what is going—

He turned and saw a squad of soldiers marching against him and a battery-operated colossal man, a giant. Police cars and fire trucks were darting left and right. All the toys from Petzoid's shelves were armed for a state of emergency.

Sullivan crouched. He tried to stand up, but he slipped on a marble.

The soldiers advanced, without any concern for their own safety.

The room was suddenly filled with laughter.

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-a-a-a-! Over and over, a maniacal laugh. Someone

was enjoying the show.

It's that laugh toy, Sullivan thought. That stupid, eerie laugh toy.

Mocking me. What the—

There was a train in the corner, going around and around.

The Good Guy express. A small setup to show the big chain buyers. How about this for a toy, guys? How about it? Some neat train set, huh?

The whistle blended with the mechanical laughter, the hooting, and sirens.

Sullivan stepped backward.

Still without a clue. As if this was a game show. Guess what's happening to you? Can you guess what's happening here? Because if you don't, you won't get the prize. No, you'll—

There were voices.

Voices! That should bring comfort. People talking. But these voices where high, scratchy voices. Like brats on amphetamine, jabbering away.

Someone was sitting in his chair, hidden by its high back. He touched the back of the chair and crept close.

Knowing what it was.

From the conversation.

Another step.

Listening to the babble.

"Hey, wanna play?"

"I like to be hugged!"

"I like to be hugged!"

"Hey, wanna play?"

Another step, now creeping closer to the chair, turning, watching the two Good Guy dolls, talking to each other.

Their heads turned to each other's eyes, blinking. Each one responding to the other, trapped by the inane conversation, forced to respond, forever and ever.

Sullivan's hand touched the arm of the chair.

He had the beginning of a thought, the start of an idea, a theory . . .

About what might be going on here.

The dolls suggested it.

The train's headlight cut through the room during each tight loop, catching the doll's chubby-cheeked freckle faces. Sullivan reached out and grabbed one doll's head, gingerly, as if grabbing something very dangerous.

"Hey wanna—"

The doll stopped in mid phrase. The conversation, the surreal dialogue was interrupted.

He waited. The dolls were still.

Sullivan laughed. "Damn," he said. Nervous laughter. He reached out to grab the other doll's head. He touched it, feeling the cold plastic. He looked at them, studied them.

No, he thought. A crazy theory. Crazy. The dolls didn't move. Couldn't move. He laughed again. Easy, Sully. You're losing it. Take it —

He heard a yell, a squeal. A Good Guy's voice. But not from these two. The voice came from behind him, yelling, squealing. He turned, crouched before the seat.

Another Good Guy was right behind Sullivan. And his face didn't look too friendly. It didn't have that trademarked Good Guy smile. And this doll wasn't saying "Wanna play?"

Sullivan saw something else. The doll was waving Sullivan's beloved golf putter over his head.

Sullivan let go of the arm of the chair. And just then the doll brought the club down, smashing Sullivan on his forehead.

He went flying backward, onto the marbles again, crushing a valiant soldier. A fire truck ran into his rump.

He felt the wetness running off the top of his head, down his cheek. I'm hurt, he thought. I'm bleeding. This is bad, very—

He scrambled to his knees and began crawling away, a frantic human crab, skittering to his door. Away from the toys. The dolls.

Almost there. The door, only feet away. And after the door, he thought, I can get to the elevator and down, and—

A needle plunged into his back at the base of his spine.

"Bull's-eye!" he heard the Good Guy say.

That wasn't one of the things it was programmed to say.

Not at all.

Sullivan fell forward, his chin smacking into the floor. The needle was stuck in his back.

Sullivan's hand flailed at his back, searching for the needle, the—

Chucky watched him. Can't reach the dart, poor guy, he thought.

I'll have to do something about that.

Chucky waddled closer to the big bossman of Play Pals, who was lying on the floor like a wounded animal.

Hey, Chucky thought, I'm moving pretty well. Only a little stiff. Maybe the old plastic joints aren't quite broken in. But I'm moving!

He saw a yo-yo on the coffee table.

Got my picture on it, he thought proudly.

He scooped the yo-yo off the coffee table. Old Sullivan seemed frozen on the floor. His get up and go, got up and left. Chucky slipped the string onto his plastic finger. It was close, but no matter. Chucky gave the yo-yo a sharp spin. The yo-yo went down smoothly and then snapped up.

"Hey, look at that. I still got it. After eight goddamn years, I still got the moves."

Then, a bit of motion caught his glass eyes.

Sullivan was crawling to his desk, so slowly now, his batteries on low. Probably going to call for help.

Still, he was making progress—and we can't have that, now can we? thought Chucky.

Chucky had another dart in his other hand.

He ran beside Sullivan, right next to him. The man kept looking forward.

Can't believe this is happening, right, babe? I know the feeling. He walked to Sullivan, making the yo-yo walk the dog, once, twice, before the string got all twisted up.

"Got to have these yo-yos retooled, pal."

"No . . ." Sullivan groaned. "No . . ." The CEO reached up and grabbed the edge of his desk with his hands, pulling himself up, kneeling.

Then—with Sullivan's hand only inches away from the phone—Chucky jammed the dart down on his right hand, pinning it to the desk.

The man screamed.

Nasty sound, thought Chucky. That must really smart. But I don't want you breaking up the party. Not yet. I'm just starting to have fun. I've been out of circulation for a long time, pal.

I've got some bogeying to do.

Chucky let the yo-yo spiral down. He grabbed the string with both his hands. Sullivan was reaching for the phone with his free hand.

"Ah-ah-ah," Chucky said, and he wrapped the string around Sullivan's neck.

And he pulled it tight.

His fingers were touching the base of the phone.

But then there was no air. Sullivan gasped but the string was so tight, it cut into his skin, closing his throat. He tried to gasp, then to shake it off.

But there was nothing.

His fingers brushed the smooth plastic of the phone, pathetically.

His lungs demanded oxygen. He could open his mouth but nothing went in.

Sullivan saw white flashes, brilliant sparks of light. He felt the blood pounding in his brain.

He smelled the plastic, the fresh, new plastic of the Good Guy doll just behind him, holding the string taut.

It's all true, he thought.

His tongue flapped. So much pain, and all he could think about was getting just one good gulp of air.

It never came.

Sullivan's head smacked down onto his desk.

Chucky studied the head. I want to make sure that he's not playing possum, Chucky thought. He could be pretending.

So he held the string tight for another minute until he was sure there was nothing going on with this sucker.

Then, he let the string go loose.

Chucky flexed his fingers. A job well done.

Just like the good old days, he thought.

The toy police siren was warbling now, the battery running down.

He climbed onto the desk.

"Nothing like a strangulation to get the circulation going."

He pushed Sullivan's head away. A small puddle of blood had dripped from his head wound onto the polished wood desk.

Chucky stepped into it, leaving footprints.

I'll have to do something about these later. Don't want no messy little Good Guy footprints around. No, sir.

He turned, and standing on the desk, he could see his reflection in the giant glass window.

And he wasn't happy at what he saw.

He looked at that stupid Good Guy face, the blue overalls with the tiny appliqued hammers and saws and planes and baseball bats. Ain't I cute.

And my tiny little Good Guy sneakers.

God, and all those freckles. Even my freckles have freckles, he thought. He opened his mouth and said, "I gotta get out of this goddamn body."

Right. And there was only one way to do that. Before this

transformation was complete.

There was time. Chucky turned to the computer.

The screen still displayed the main menu.

“All right,” Chucky said. “Let’s find where you are, you little shit.”

He hit the keys, scrolling past directories and lists, until he found what he was looking for.

File: Andy Barclay.

Bingo, thought Chucky. Chucky grinned at the screen. In the dark room, he saw his face reflected back.

It’s been eight years, Andy Barclay. Let’s see how you’re doing, bub. ’Cause your ol’ pal Chucky is going to pay you a visit.

5

Andy sat in the back of the yellow bus, ignored—and not minding it.

He looked out the window. He saw signs for towns he never heard of, and gas stations and quick marts offering everything from lotto tickets to foot-long hot dogs.

He pushed his hair off his forehead.

The bus rumbled along, catching every pothole, every crack in the highway.

I wish I wasn't here, Andy thought.

Anywhere but here.

"All right!" he heard the boy next to him squeal. The little black kid —what was he seven, eight?—was playing a hand-held video game, pushing the buttons wildly.

He's in hog heaven, Andy thought. And he doesn't even seem to be nervous about where we're going.

"I made the third level. Excellent!" the kid said.

He turned and caught Andy looking at the game. The little kid smiled at him. Andy nodded and smiled back.

"Hey, I just got to the third level. Never did that before."

Andy nodded. Very nice.

The bus lurched. Everyone's brains were getting a real good shaking.

Andy started to turn away.

"Hey, what did you say your name was?"

Andy turned back.

"Andy."

The boy made a face. "We only go by last names at Kent."

Kent Military School. A few minutes ago Andy had seen a sign announcing that the school was only five miles ahead. Kent Military School. Isn't life wonderful? thought Andy.

"Barclay," Andy said.

"My name's Tyler."

The kid held up his Game Boy. I used to like video games, Andy thought. I remember I had one of the first Nintendos, before all my friends. Even though Mom couldn't afford to buy me a lot of games, still I had some. I had Super Mario Brothers. And I had Good Guy

Adventures. Help the Good Guy get out of the haunted house.

Boy, did they have that one wrong.

The kid dangled his Game Boy. “You wanna play me, Barclay?”

Andy shook his head. The bus hit another hole and groaned, as it rattled forward.

“Come on, Barclay, I’ll give you a ten point lead. What do you say?”

Andy shook his head, looking away from the kid and turning back to the window. He looked at the farmland, dotted wilh cows chewing their cud as they watched the yellow bus roll by.

Andy expected Tyler to keep nagging him. But, instead, there was silence. And when Andy risked looking back at the kid, he seemed intent on playing his game.

But Andy also saw something else.

I shut him down, Andy thought. I stepped on the little brat.

He shook his head, annoyed at himself for being such a turd.

“Hey, Tyler.”

The kid kept his head down, cautious. “You’ve been at Kent a long time?”

Tyler let his eyes drift away from the game screen. “Two years.”

Andy smiled at him.

Two years. And he’s only seven. Poor kid’s been in military school since he was five, six?

Then, with Andy still looking at him, Tyler smiled. “It’s not so bad. I’m used to it. You know, when I first came to Kent . . .” Tyler lowered his voice, trusting Andy. Not wanting anyone else to hear. “I really missed my dad. A lot! But he always told me, soldiers don’t cry. So I didn’t. Not too much, anyway. And I got used to it.”

I guess you can get used to anything, thought Andy. I’m sixteen and I feel like I’m going to prison. This kid’s got a better attitude than I do.

Andy sniffed the air but all he could smell was bus exhaust, seeping in through the open windows, through the cracks in the floor.

And he thought: Tyler’s about the same age as I was. The same age as when it all began. My problems with Chucky.

He felt bad for himself then, looking at Tyler’s shining black face, so brave.

He thought about himself when he was eight. Fighting a doll that wanted to take his body. And no one believed me. They still don’t believe me.

If only I had a dad, Andy thought. Maybe that might have made a difference.

“Did you just spend the weekend with your dad?”

Tyler shook his head, and he went back to his game. Wrong question, Andy guessed.

Tyler made a face, pressing his lips together. As if it was no big deal.

"Nah. He's stationed in Japan. He says he'll bring me there someday. No, I was staying with my cousins."

The game machine made a funny beeping sound. Tyler just lost his round. But he didn't care.

"I stayed with my cousins. Man, what a bunch of geeks. I hated it. I'm glad I'm going back to Kent."

"What about your mom?"

Wanting to say: I haven't seen my mom in a long time. The doctors say it wouldn't be therapeutic. She's making so much progress. Because they don't believe her either. They don't believe that she saw Chucky come to life.

Or believe Kyle.

God, whatever happened to her? She had a bad reputation before she ever hooked up with Chucky and me.

Whatever happened to her?

"My mom—she went to heaven when I was a little kid. Me and my dad are on our own. He says she watches us, that she can see how good I'm doing . . ." Tyler turned away. "How good I'm doing on my own."

"You're pretty young to be out on your own."

Tyler scrunched up his face indignantly. The look on his face was so stern Andy almost laughed.

"I'm seven and a half. That's not so young."

Andy nodded. If this rug rat can face Kent, then I can. He turned back to the window. Then the bus passed a sign. Kent Military School, 1 mile. Just ahead. The bus started climbing a hill, groaning, fighting its way sluggishly up the hill.

Not so young . . .

For a lot of things.

"No," Andy said. "I guess not."

The dreams had never stopped. Doctors told Andy that the dreams would end. And they never did.

And long ago, Andy thought he figured out why.

The dreams didn't stop because everyone told him that it all never happened. But he knew that it had.

It was just a little difference of opinion.

And some nights he dreamed that he was in his apartment with his mom, when it was just the two of them. Celebrating Christmas, getting each other presents. Sharing ice cream or a deep-dish pizza from Tonio's. Mom worked hard so that Andy could have things. Even popular, expensive things. Things like the Good Guy doll.

And he would relive the battle in the apartment; Chucky coming after him, mumbling those words, words that Andy never forgot.

Ade due. Damballa! *Kenye due.* Damballa!

His mom saved him. But in the dream, sometimes, his mom is too late. When Andy opens his eyes and looks down, he sees the blue overalls, the Good Guy sneakers. And when he looks up, to a mirror, he sees himself with Chucky's maniacal grin.

And he whispers . . .

"I'm you, buddy boy. I'm you!"

"Hey," Tyler said, and the vision vanished slowly, melting away from some screen inside his mind. "Hey, I got something you might like."

Andy turned back to Tyler. The kid dug in his pants pocket. He took something out and then extended his hand to Andy. Andy stuck out his hand.

"What? What is it?"

Tyler put it into his hand.

Andy saw a compact pocket knife with just one blade.

"Go on," Tyler said. "It's yours."

Andy shook his head. "No. Sorry, Tyler, but I can't take your knife." He started to give the boy back the pocketknife.

But Tyler shook his head. "Go ahead, Barclay. I got *lots* of them. My dad sends 'em to me from Taiwan. I don't need this one."

Andy felt the knife in the palm of his hand. He didn't want to slap the kid down again. What the heck, it's a gift. Take it, he thought. He smiled. He opened the knife, exposing the blade. It was sharp, silvery. This was no dull Scout knife. Andy let his thumb touch the blade. A bit of pressure and it would easily cut his skin.

Andy looked up. "Thanks."

"Sure. You know, my dad says a good soldier is always prepared. You should always have a weapon."

A seven-year-old Rambo.

There were shouts from the other kids on the bus. Andy looked up and saw a sign that said Kent Military School.

"Don't worry, Barclay," Tyler said. "You'll learn the ropes."

And Andy nodded as the bus entered the gate to the school grounds.

The bus chugged past the open gate. Andy saw two cadets in full uniform standing guard.

As if we were entering Fort Knox, Andy thought. Or Oz.

I may not be able to deal with all this.

To the right, he saw more cadets—a mixture of boys and girls standing beside two trees. He saw a girl, dark haired, very pretty, tightening a rope suspended between the two trees.

“That’s De Silva,” Tyler said. “She’s nice.”

Coed military school. Things could be worse, Andy thought, as he watched De Silva demonstrate how to cross the rope bridge, shimmying with hands and feet. She was pretty. But she also looked like one tough cookie.

The bus veered right, and a giant field appeared, dotted with clusters of cadets, some marching, some climbing wood walls covered with rope netting. Drummers were marching in a line, beating out a rhythm.

The place looked ready for war.

Andy saw a big stone building faced with heavy columns and windows that seemed to stretch almost two floors in height.

“What’s that?” Andy said.

“That’s the administration building. That’s where Colonel Cochrane’s office is.”

“What, no general?”

Andy laughed but Tyler said, “He’s a nice man, I like him. You’ll probably meet him first thing.”

“Your recommendation is good enough for me.”

The bus passed the administration building and moved next to a row of boxy buildings, the cadets’ dorms.

Finally the bus stopped. The brakes screamed out in protest. There was a whoosh—and the doors finally opened. Everyone in the front of the bus stood up and started streaming out.

Andy stood up, next to Tyler, towering over him.

“Let me know if you need any help,” Tyler said.

Andy smiled at him.

“Thanks,” Andy said, forcing himself to sound as earnest as possible. “I will.”

6

Andy stood, feeling this crazy desire to snap to attention. He felt Colonel Cochrane looking at him, checking him out.

Andy used the opportunity to study the room. There was a glass case against one wall, filled with toy soldiers. Toy soldiers, real ones—it's all the same to the colonels and generals of the world. A bookcase which, Andy guessed, didn't have too many volumes of poetry in it. He saw only lots of books on World War II and the Persian Gulf.

Cochrane's desk was neat and orderly, ready for action. A large standing globe was off to one side, right next to a trophy case. It looked as if the Kent cadets did things besides drill and study. Basketball. Football.

Cochrane saw Andy looking around.

"Come here, Barclay. I want you to see these." Cochrane walked over to a display case. Andy followed, and saw rows of medals laid out, treasured items.

"That's the Purple Heart, Barclay." Cochrane tapped the case. "There's the Medal of Honor . . . the Silver Star."

Andy felt Cochrane look up, staring it him. "They're just medals, Barclay. Just symbols. What counts is what's in here." Cochrane pointed to his heart.

"That's what got me and my men through 'Nam in one piece."

Andy nodded. And landed you this wonderful gig running a play school for military wannabes. And some who don't wanna . . .

The stuffy air made it hard for Andy to breathe. This interview was the first step in his introduction to the Kent way of life. Probably no big deal.

Usually.

But Andy could guess what was coming next.

"Take a seat, Barclay." Cochrane pointed to a wood chair facing his desk.

Cochrane walked to the desk and sat on it, facing Andy. Informal. Just us men talking and all that.

Andy looked up.

"Courage, that's what those medals stand for. Courage, and the ability to do the hard thing, Barclay. To sacrifice for others. You know what I'm talking about?"

Andy nodded.

He felt an impulse to say, “Yes, sir.”

“That’s the ideal that Kent was built on.”

Cochrane slid off the edge of his desk, the informal, fatherly side of the interview obviously over.

There was a manilla folder on Cochrane’s desk. The colonel walked behind the desk and sat down. He flipped open the folder, taking a moment, nodding to himself before he looked up.

Still nodding, Cochrane fixed Andy with his best press on, men stare.

“You realize that you have your work cut out for you, Barclay. Jumping in midway through the semester. You’ll be the new kid. It won’t be easy.”

Andy nodded. “It wasn’t my idea.”

Wrong answer, Andy thought. The colonel pushed back from his desk a bit. His face turned a notch more severe.

Cochrane tapped the folder. “I see that for the past”—Cochrane leaned forward, looking at the top sheet in the folder. *“eight* years you’ve been in one foster home after another. Mind if I ask why?”

“They took me away from my mother. She’s . . . under special care.”

So special that I haven’t seen her in nearly a year. It would bring it all back, the doctors say. Her fantasies, her crazy fantasies about the doll.

“I know that,” Cochrane said. He nodded. “But how come you never got settled anywhere?”

Andy looked away. He heard drumming from outside. Teenagers barking orders to little kids, playing soldiers. It’s parade dress, boys and girls, and don’t forget to wash your hands after you pee.

“Adjustment problems.”

“I can read the report, Barclay. I can see what it says right here.” Cochrane leaned forward. “But I’m asking you.”

Cochrane sounded angry. I’m not making any friends here, Andy thought. Not exactly getting off to a good start.

How much time do you have? thought Andy.

Do you want to hear about the crazy people who used the money for the foster kids to stretch their own household budget? The endless nights of Hamburger Helper while they stuffed coffee cans full with the money?

Or how about the “dad” who believed in equal doses of the Bible and the belt.

“I—I never felt comfortable with those people. They weren’t my

family. They just pretended, and—” Andy turned and looked at Cochrane, attempting to make contact, to explain. “They were strangers.”

But the expression on Cochrane’s face—dissatisfied, concerned—didn’t change.

The colonel stood up. The interview, not having gone well, was coming to an end.

Way to go, Andy thought. You’re off to a good start.

“All right, Barclay. Listen up.” The colonel took a step to the giant windows that overlooked the parade grounds. “I’m willing to cut you some slack—you’re new, you’ve had it rough.”

At the window, Cochrane turned. “But you’re a troublemaker. That’s clear from your file. And I’ve got a real problem with troublemakers. They don’t fit the *Kent ideal.”*

Cochrane walked close to Andy. “They don’t fit the system.” He tapped Andy’s shoulder. “So, here’s my advice. And if you want to get along here, you’ll listen to it. *Grow. Up.* You’re not a kid anymore. It’s time for you to can those fantasies of killer dolls.”

The colonel blocked the light, covering Andy with a shadow.

Someone else yelling at me to forget, Andy thought.

No—ordering me to forget.

Which is exactly what I’d love to do. I wish it would all go away. I wish none of it had ever happened.

Andy looked up, wanting to say: Just don’t tell me that it’s a fantasy.

The colonel waited.

Andy opened his mouth. “Yes, sir.”

Cochrane patted his shoulder, satisfied that he had hammered home the day’s self-improvement message.

“Barclay . . . ‘When I was a child, I thought as a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things . . .’ ”

Another pat, and the colonel moved away. “That’s from First Corinthians. From the Good Book. You’ll find a copy in your dorm.”

The colonel sat down again.

“So look alive, Barclay. You’ve got things to do. And remember: At Kent, we take bed wetters and turn them into men.”

Andy stood up. He saluted. Which is what he guessed he was supposed to do. And then he walked out of the administrator’s office, thinking: That’s great for bed wetters.

But that’s not my problem.

Tyler had his nose in his video game, even while this burly barber from hell ran a combination lawn mower-hedge trimmer over Tyler's already short hair.

Andy was next.

I'm gonna look like a cue ball, Andy thought, sitting there watching.

Tyler was oblivious of the butchery of his tight black curls.

The barber was a burly, semibald man whose name was stenciled over his shirt lapel: Sgt. Botnick. Between runs with the electric shears. Botnick stared at a TV, watching *Tiny Toons.* Whistling. Laughing at the TV.

I'm in hell, thought Andy.

And Sergeant Botnick had a tattoo on his left arm that rippled as he cut Tyler's hair. An eagle clutching a writhing snake.

Botnick whipped the white sheet off Tyler.

"Presto! You're bald."

Tyler looked up from his Game Boy. His face registered complete shock. "Where's my hair?"

Botnick snapped the sheet. He looked over at Andy. "Next victim."

Tyler shook his head, rubbed it, feeling the dark peach fuzz. He looked at Andy. "It always feels so weird."

Andy got up. Botnick waited with the sheet.

"Come on, Barclay. Get a move on."

Andy stepped through the mossy forest of hair on the floor. He sat down and Botnick swirled the sheet around him with practiced ease. Andy picked up a whiff of something stronger than the antiseptic that supposedly sterilized the combs and scissors.

Old Sergeant Botnick was in need of a shower.

"Now what would you like?" Botnick said, fingering Andy's hair, pushing it off his forehead. "A page boy, a little bob, a Beatle cut?"

Botnick laughed loudly at his last joke.

Andy waited for the clicking of the shears. He could watch the mutilation in the mirror. The eagle squeezed the snake.

"Kiss it good-bye, plebe," Botnick said. And the barber picked up a long, silvery scissors, clicking at the air. It reminded Andy of Edward Scissorhands.

Except Edward Scissorhands wasn't an asshole.

Botnick snipped at the hair, randomly snipping off a clump here, a clump there. He started whistling. On TV, a junior Bugs Bunny did something funny. He hit someone with a frying pan and Botnick laughed.

Pointing his scissors right at Andy.

"Hey," Andy said. "Watch it."

Botnick made the shears click, still laughing. Botnick went back to his pruning. "You know, Barclay, the Romans invented the military cut. Yep, that's a fact."

A song echoed from the TV speaker.

"We're tiny, we're looney . . ."

"Yes, the Romans kept their hair real short so their enemies couldn't grab it in battle and—"

Snips close to Andy's ear. He felt the twin blades moving.

"Cut their throats. Makes sense doesn't it?"

Then—completely unexpected—Botnick grabbed Andy's still long hair and tilted his head back. He placed the blunt edge of the cold scissors against Andy's throat. He rubbed the dull edge back and forth.

"See."

He's crazy, thought Andy. The idiot's cut too many heads of hair.

Botnick let him go. "Lean forward."

Andy tilted his head forward. Botnick clipped at the nape of Andy's neck. Andy could watch the brown tufts gently falling to the tiled floor.

Great piles of it. There won't be anything left.

"Okay, get your head back up." Botnick directed.

Andy looked up at his reflection.

It was someone he didn't recognize.

A Hare Krisna guy. A baby marine off to Iwo Jima.

No, he thought, calming himself. That's me. There were still tufts of longish hair to one side.

Then it would be all over.

"Oh, shit," Andy said.

Botnick laughed. He started in on the last longest strands. "Hey, what's the matter? Don't you like the cut I'm giving you?" A bigger laugh. "I'm offended. Or maybe . . ."

Andy turned away. He couldn't watch it anymore.

"Maybe you liked looking like a girl?"

Andy watched the TV. The cartoon show was ending.

A commercial came on. Music, familiar music. Then—

He gripped the edge of the barber's chair. It was two cartoon Good Guys singing. Impossible, Andy thought. They don't make Good Guys anymore. That's all over, all . . .

The Good Guys sang. "We're back! We're still the best friends, till the end . . ."

"Hey, kid," Botnick said. "Look this way."

Andy didn't take his eyes off the screen.

The animated stiff changed to a kid playing with a Good Guy doll. Making it stand up, hugging it.

The song went on. "We can say three different sentences."

Ade due, Damballa . . .

Andy shook his head.

"Barclay, stay still, goddamn it. Stay . . ."

The boy in the commercial turned the Good Guy so that he looked out at all the kids in TV land.

"Wanna play?"

Tyler said something.

"Cooool," Tyler squealed.

Botnick forced Andy's head forward. The shears snipped fast, hunting, searching for any strands.

The jingle picked up a faster tempo.

Then more singing. The voices were squealy Good Guy voices. "We're back, we're back! And we wanna play, we wanna stay . . ."

There was a close-up of the Good Guy doll, looking out, looking at Andy.

Andy shook his head.

"Damn, I nearly cut you, kid!"

Tiny Toons came on again.

Tyler was beside Andy. On his feet.

"Cool. Those Good Guys are excellent. I definitely want one for Christmas. I'm going to write my dad, tell him . . ."

Andy was close enough to reach out and touch Tyler. "No. No you don't."

Botnick turned on the electric clippers, ready to finish his job.

Andy didn't care.

7

"You know your way around here, eh, Tyler?" Andy said, shifting his bulky duffel bag higher up on his shoulder. He looked down at the nearly bald kid, carrying Andy's uniform—crisp and neat—in his outstretched arms.

The little kid's looking for a family, Andy thought, instead, he gets a military school.

Tyler looked up at him and smiled. "I know *all* the secret places in Kent, Barclay. Stick with me."

Then Tyler started laughing.

"What?" Andy said. "What's so funny?"

They passed other cadets in uniform. Andy felt them looking at him. Checking me out, Andy thought.

And he had to wonder: What kind of welcoming ritual does the teenage gestapo serve up here? Is there any special initiation ceremony for new plebes? Drinking chicken's blood? Cold showers?

He felt the cadets staring, their eyes burning into him.

New meat.

Tyler was still laughing, giggling.

"What are you laughing at?" Andy said.

"Nice haircut, dude!" More giggles.

Andy grinned back at Tyler. "Go stuff it, skinhead." He reached out and rubbed Tyler's nearly bald head.

They came to an intersection of corridors, a crossroads in this mini Pentagon.

Tyler handed Andy his uniform. "Well, Barclay, this is it. Your room is right down there." Andy glanced down a long corridor. More cadets were standing around, talking outside their rooms. A damn gauntlet, Andy thought.

He nodded.

"And I'm in 205. If you need anything, that's where I'll be."

"Thanks." Andy turned, and started toward his room. He looked back over his shoulder. "See you around, Tyler."

Andy walked down the long corridor.

Andy heard the sound his steps made on the floor. He heard the

buzzing of voices, the swell of laughter and indistinguishable comments. And—always—he felt everyone looking at him, studying him.

He had a thought. Perhaps I should have tried to get along with that last family. The Pastuks. Mr. and Mrs. Pastuk, with four of their own children and three foster children.

They had a teenage son. His name was John. But John, who wore Queensryche T-shirts and studded wrist bands, didn't call himself John.

He called himself *Slash.*

Nice name, thought Andy. Kind of has a ring to it. *Slash.* And John Pastuk, aka Slash, lived up to his billing. He had knives, so many knives. A knife for every job. Slash was well-equipped for just about any knife emergency.

And not a day passed without Slash sticking one in Andy's face and saying, laughing, that Andy had better *watch his ass.*

The Pastuks didn't seem to note anything particularly demented in old John-boy's behavior. Oh, he did have an incident or two at school. Some intimidation of John's math teacher, followed by a four-week suspension.

But Slash came back properly chagrined. He promised he wouldn't bring his knives to school.

At least, no one would *see* him bring his knives to school.

Andy remembered thinking: It's only a matter of time before something bad happens to me here.

So he left. He ran away.

Just to force the Illinois Children's Welfare Bureau to do something.

And Kent Military School is what they did.

Andy kept walking, thinking: out of the frying pan . . .

Into the damned fire.

He heard a sound.

Lost in his thoughts. He didn't see the other cadets, quieting down, pressing against the wall.

The sound of shoes, heels clicking against tiles. Andy, looking down, was thinking and not paying any attention to the sound. Until he bumped into someone.

"Excuse me," he said even as he looked up. "I'm . . ."

He thought he had bumped into a cadet. But this was an officer, his chest dripping with tiny colored ribbons. He glowered at Andy, his face rigid, his skin taut.

He doesn't like what he sees, thought Andy.

"I'm sorry . . . sir. I—"

The other cadets, the veterans, the ones in the know, were plastered against the wall.

Andy backed up a step. He read the name just above the colorful field of medals. Rawlings.

A name that I'd better remember.

Andy started to say something. But he looked at the other cadets, their butts pasted to the wall, looking straight ahead. And—*boing!*—it finally dawned on Andy what he should do.

He moved to a narrow blank spot on the wall.

Only then did Rawlings move, the staccato clicking of his heels starting up again, slowly bringing calm and reassurance to the cadets.

Andy watched the other cadets move away from him.

As if I have the black death, he thought.

Not even here one day and already I'm making my mark.

His room was just ahead. He took a breath and walked into the empty room, glad to have the stares of the cadets behind him.

The room was a fitting end point for the day so far. Stone walls, painted a pale puke green. Two bunks that looked as if they were designed for discomfort. Two modular closets, two small desks. A trunk at the foot of each bunk.

Where's the TV? My phone?

One bunk had books and papers scattered on it, so Andy tossed his duffel bag onto the other bunk.

He walked to the window. It overlooked the quad, an open area surrounded by the dorm buildings. He saw a few cadets standing outside.

He turned back to the room. The bunk with books on it looked messy. Not up to snuff, not if old Brigadier General Rawlings pays a visit. Andy grew curious about his roommate.

He unzipped his duffel bag. Not much there. Some jeans, a copy of *Cold Fire,* the new Dean Koontz book, socks, shirts, underwear.

Not much.

He heard a thump.

"What?" he said, turning around.

Another thump.

Andy stood up. The sound came from inside the room, it came from . . .

THUMP!

The closet.

And then it was there. Something he kept a close watch on. Something inside him that he watched real carefully.

It was one thing to be scared by scowling cadets and pretend officers who looked like they wanted to chew you right up.

It was another to be scared.

Of other things.

Of small spaces, where small things could hide.

Under beds, in basements . . . in the backseats of cars.

It never goes away, he thought. No matter how much time passes.

Thump!

Something was moving in the closet. He walked to it slowly, thinking, what could it be? A prank? Of course, something got stuck in there. A dog. A cat. A skunk.

Thump . . . Thump!

Louder. No, it's too big for that, way too big. It's something big.

"Jeez," Andy said. He reached out and grabbed the handle of the closet.

He heard voices outside; the cadets. Waiting for me to do this, waiting for the prank . . . ready to run in.

Spray me with shaving cream. Give me a pink belly.

Get me out of here.

Andy took a breath. Then he pulled down on the handle.

And a fat kid tumbled out. He fell to the floor. There was a horrible smack that made Andy wince. Fat or not, the kid made a bad landing, his head crashing against the tiled floor. Andy stood there a second.

The kid was bound tight, his hands tied behind his back, his legs tied together. His mouth was covered with metallic duct tape.

His eyes looked horrible. All wide with terror, anger. *Bug-eyed.*

This is my roommate, Andy thought. He quickly crouched next to the pear-shaped kid and slowly peeled off the tape.

"Oouch," the kid said as a small opening appeared. "Ow—take it easy."

Andy pulled at the tape even more slowly.

"Are you okay?"

The kid looked at him. His hair was pasted to his head by sweat. With the tape off, Andy moved to untie the knot holding the kid's hands together, it was tight, and it wasn't going to come undone easily.

"Oh, I'm just great. Don't I look great? Tied up and gagged? Never had a better day."

The kid licked his lips as if the adhesive were still there, still sticky.

"Those bastards, those damn bastards."

The knot started giving way, and then Andy's roommate's hands were finally free.

He undid the rope around his ankles himself.

Andy sat back, while the kid kept repeating, "Bastards. I hate their guts, the goddamned . . ."

"What happened?" Andy asked during a momentary break.

The kid—probably the same age as Andy even though he looked younger, with his puffy cheeks and a belly that stretched against his uniform shirt—looked at Andy as if he had just arrived from Mars.

"God, what does it look like happened? Shelton, *that's* what happened. Shelton and his goons, his lackeys."

The kid stood up.

There were snickers outside.

Andy nodded. The kid's embarrassed, he thought. Nice way to meet your new roommate.

The kid started to cool down. "But hey—thanks for helping me. I could have been in there for hours if you didn't come along."

"Don't mention it." Andy stuck out his hand. "I'm Andy."

Now the kid laughed, a bitter sound. Andy's hand stuck out in the air, waiting to make a connection. Did I do something wrong? Andy thought.

"Man, you *must* be new. Too new to know that they don't tolerate any individuality around here. Certainly nothing so personal as a first name."

Andy nodded. "Barclay," he said.

The kid grabbed Andy's hand and pumped it.

And Andy could feel the kid's gratitude, not just for saving him. But for the handshake, the simple offer of friendship.

"Whitehurst," the kid said. "Harold Aubrey, for the record."

"Who's Shelton?"

Whitehurst pulled his hand back and laughed. "Shelton? Cadet Major Brett C. Shelton? He's god—around here, anyway. But don't expect any mercy from him." Whitehurst laughed, a hollow sound. Whitehurst looked around, gesturing.

"Welcome to hell, Barclay!"

8

Whitehurst instructed Andy in how to wear the Kent uniform and then hurried him to the parade ground for All-School Formation. A trumpet could be heard echoing from the quad.

"C'mon, Barclay. Believe me—you don't want to be late for first full company fall-in."

Andy followed Whitehurst out of the dorm, across the quad, and then to the parade ground. It was filled with all of the military school's students, from the pathetic seven year olds standing grimly at attention, to the older teenagers, looking almost like real soldiers.

Andy glimpsed the female cadet he had seen when he entered. The one Tyler said was called De Silva. Her dark hair caught the sun and shimmered.

She was standing in the group that Whitehurst was waddling toward. Andy followed him, watching De Silva talking to another girl.

That's one good thing, thought Andy. At least there are girls here. It may be hell . . .

But there are perks.

Whitehurst went to the front of the line, close to De Silva. Andy stood beside him. He looked at the girl. She was still talking to her friend, but then—did he imagine it?

She looked at him. And she smiled.

Andy smiled back. He was about to say something when Whitehurst nudged him and pointed out to the field.

"It's Ellis, the company captain."

Andy faced forward and saw the senior cadet. And then Ellis barked, filling the parade ground with his voice. "Company fall in!"

In an instant, everyone was standing at attention, eyes forward. Andy put his feet together, feeling as if he were playing soldier. He tried to stand stiff. But he also risked another glance at De Silva, just to his right.

When he turned, she was looking at him. But with Ellis's "ten-hut!" De Silva snapped forward, crisp and military.

And Andy turned around. Across the way, with the younger kids—the minisoldiers—he saw Tyler.

"Prepare for inspection," Ellis shouted.

"What a joke," Andy whispered to Whitehurst.

But Whitehurst hissed back at him, “Shut up.”

Then Andy saw someone enter the parade ground from the right. Dramatically, slowly, with everyone just getting a glimpse from their peripheral vision.

“Who’s that?” Andy whispered, obviously distressing Whitehurst.

“It’s Shelton, damn it. Now shut up.”

Andy, his head locked forward, followed Shelton’s progress to Captain Ellis. This is crazy, thought Andy. Shelton is just a student, just a high-ranking student. What is this, Operation Campus Storm?

Ellis snapped his heels together and saluted Shelton.

“All present and accounted for . . .” A slight pause, then, the last word as if shot out of rifle—“sir!”

Ellis’s voice was quiet, restrained.

I definitely get the feeling, Andy thought, that this is one of those cases where they have given too much power to someone of limited ability.

“Thank you, captain.” Shelton said clearly. He then turned slowly, giving his attention to the troops.

Shelton was facing Andy’s squad, his division, whatever it was called.

Actually, thought Andy, Shelton’s facing me, looking right at me.

Shelton walked to him. While all the other students stood there, straight as arrows.

Shelton came right up to Andy’s face.

“You’re the new boy, right?” Andy looked at Shelton, just a bit. Making eye contact. Shelton smiled and said, “How ya doing?”

Andy smiled back. “Pretty good.”

Shelton’s smile evaporated before Andy finished his first word. And when Shelton spoke, it was in a different voice, loud and cutting.

“Who said you could look at me?”

This is a damn game, thought Andy. And I just made the wrong move.

Andy opened his mouth. But Shelton took another step, and put his face close to Andy’s.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Shelton?” Andy said.

Shelton shook his head. Andy thought he heard someone groan behind him. Is it that bad? Andy thought. Am I screwing up that bad?

And Shelton put his nose right on Andy’s. A crazed drill instructor. This guy has seen too many war movies. This is school . . . not D-Day.

"That's *Major* Shelton to you, asshole!"

Andy hurried to correct himself, hoping to get Shelton's barking mouth off his face. *"Major* Shelton," Andy said.

But he was only answered with another bark. "Major Shelton, *sir!"*

It's a damn tennis game, and I'm way down on points, Andy thought.

Quickly he returned, "Major Shelton, *sir."*

Shelton pulled back an inch, removing the spray of spittle that came out of his mouth every time he screamed at Andy.

"And what's your name, dipweed?"

"Andy Barclay . . . sir."

Shelton grinned.

He must live for moments like this.

Maybe, maybe he also has a taste for even nastier stuff. Like old John Pastuk . . . old Slash. I'm going to have to watch him real carefully.

"That's better, private," Shelton said. Shelton turned and saw Whitehurst.

Andy watched Shelton's eyes grow wide. Did his pupils dilate or am I imagining it? Andy thought. He felt Whitehurst beside him, looking straight ahead.

Andy imagined the fat cadet praying: Please, let Shelton keep on moving.

But he didn't.

Shelton planted himself in front of Whitehurst. He shook his head, and then he raised his voice, so everyone could hear. Even the little seven-year-old cadets. In case they needed a role model in life.

"Whitehurst," Shelton boomed, "you are, without a doubt, the most pathetic . . ." He paused.

Shelton searched his limited vocabulary.

"Thing that I have *ever* seen."

Shelton came close to Whitehurst's face and gave him the spittle-and-bellow treatment. "Now, wouldn't you agree?"

And Whitehurst didn't say anything.

Good for you, Andy thought. That's the way.

"I asked you a question, fat boy!"

Another pause. Out of the corner of his eye Andy could see that Shelton had his face right up to Whitehurst's.

Whitehurst stammered, "I—" Then—an amazing act of bravery —"No, sir. I don't agree, sir!"

Shelton yelled at him. “Are you contradicting me, fat boy?”

Andy heard something from the side . . . down where De Silva stood. Barely audible. But not missed by Shelton.

“You asshole . . .”

Shelton moved away from Whitehurst and marched down the line to De Silva.

She saved him, Andy thought. She saved Whitehurst’s butt. Not only is she gorgeous, not only can she put together a wicked rope bridge, but she’s also a hero.

Now Shelton stood in front of De Silva, but he didn’t get quite so close to her. A bit of respect there, Andy noted.

“What did you say?”

Andy expected her to answer, “Nothing, sir.” She would probably try to let the thing slide away.

But then, in a voice that rivaled Shelton’s for volume, she shouted, “I said, ‘You asshole’ . . . sir.”

There were giggles everywhere. And despite the insanity of all this, Andy was enjoying the show. It may be a stupid game, but—thanks to De Silva—our side just got a few points.

Shelton looked around as if he could squash the giggles by glaring at the cadets. Then he turned back to De Silva. She had an advantage over him, Andy thought. She’s obviously a damned good soldier. Tough, brave. But she also has something else that Shelton wants. And hasn’t gotten.

“Think you’re pretty smart, don’t you, De Silva?”

“Yes, sir.” Andy heard her answer brightly.

Andy risked looking down the line. There were more giggles. Everyone, except Shelton, was enjoying this.

But Shelton nodded and took a step backward. “All right, De Silva. Give me twenty-five. Right now!”

Now the giggles in the company were replaced with groans. Twenty-five? Right, Andy thought. Twenty-five push-ups.

I don’t know if I could do even five push-ups.

But he saw De Silva throw herself to the grass and start doing the push-ups. He watched her going up and down, the line of her back straight. They were smooth, clean push-ups. She did them fast, without any groaning or struggling to get her bottom back in the air.

“One! . . . two! . . . three! . . .” She counted them out.

De Silva moved effortlessly, shouting out the numbers. Shelton, acting satisfied, walked away from her and headed back to the center of the field, addressing the rest of his troops.

"You girls in the company may think that because you're so much weaker, you deserve special treatment."

Yes, a real asshole, Andy thought.

The genuine article.

He thought of Kyle in the factory with him. How brave she was, how she saved him from Chucky when it would have been so much easier to leave to save herself. Kyle was a tough kid. She could have knocked Shelton on his ass in seconds.

"Well, forget it, girls. There will be no special treatment, not for anybody."

And punctuating Shelton's little speech about equality for the sexes, Andy heard De Silva—even louder now, as if hammering home to Shelton that she was going to do this, no problem. None at all.

"Eighteen . . . nineteen . . . twenty . . ."

She didn't even sound winded.

Andy looked right at her.

What a woman, he thought.

There was a murmur from the cadets. Everyone's pulling for De Silva, thought Andy. It's De Silva versus Shelton, and there was no question who most of the school was pulling for.

But then Andy remembered something Whitehurst had said. Something about Shelton's lackeys . . . his goons. He must have some friends, some underlings.

Shelton turned and saw De Silva breezing through the push-ups. He didn't look like a happy camper.

You prick, Andy thought.

"Twenty-one . . ." De Silva said.

Shelton sneered at De Silva. "One-handed. Give me the next four *one-handed,* De Silva."

More groans from the cadets. But De Silva threw her weight to one side, and now grunting, really struggling, she did the next push-up with one arm.

I thought only Rocky could do that, Andy thought. Rocky and Arnold.

And those two guys from *Saturday Night Live,* Hans and Franz . . . who want to "pump you up."

De Silva was tilted and she could look right at Andy. Her face was red, her hair touched the grass. And though her lips were pulled back from her teeth, grimacing with the effort, she smiled at him.

No one's going to beat her, Andy thought.

And then, looking at her, at her spirit, her strength, her

determination, he grew scared for her.

As if it couldn't last.

As if all that spirit had to be crushed.

Because that's how the world works.

"Twenty-three! . . . Twenty-four! . . ."

Shelton walked back to her. He put his shiny shoes right next to her face when it landed. Welcome to Fascist Teenagers Training Camp.

"Twenty-five!" De Silva shouted.

Andy watched De Silva fall to the ground—for just a second—before she stood up, back at attention. She ran her fingers through her hair, as if she had just taken a little stroll around the block.

"Whew," she said.

An understatement.

I'm in love, thought Andy.

Shelton stood before her, shaking his head. Cracking De Silva could grow to be an obsession of his. Maybe it already was an obsession.

That, and making life hell for Whitehurst.

Shelton looked around at the company, his day ruined.

"Captain Ellis," he yelled, "lead the company in parade drill. One hour." He shook his head, walking off the grass. "They look terrible."

Ellis saluted again.

Shelton walked away.

Although Andy thought that this might just be one of the worst places in the world to be, he also thought that there are three plusses.

There was Tyler—a kid who seemed all alone, just like Andy. There was Whitehurst, who needs a friend if anyone does.

And there was De Silva. Who didn't need anybody and who was the best looking girl Andy had ever seen.

Stupid military uniform or not.

There are worse places, Andy thought.

He marched with them, stamping on the grass with the other pretend soldiers who seemingly—had only one enemy.

Major Shelton.

9

Ronald Tyler skipped—just a bit—as he went into the administration building.

Maybe, he thought, there will be a letter today. Dad promised a letter a week. And there had been nothing waiting for him at his grandmother's house.

"Maybe back at school," she said. "Sure."

Tyler had smiled and nodded to her. Sure, maybe even two letters.

A letter from his dad was magic. Course his letters weren't ever long. He was a busy man, so busy. But still he told Tyler about the places he went, the people he met, the planes he flew.

Tyler ran up the steps, nearly bumping into a senior cadet, who luckily was not one of Shelton's goons. This guy just smiled. There were nice people here, kids like Barclay. He was a nice kid. Doesn't know the ropes and he needs my help, thought Tyler. But he's a nice kid.

He entered the building and went up the big staircase. Then he took a left down to the mail room. Tyler saw the guy who worked there. Sergeant Clark—always smiling. He was shuffling through letters.

Tyler was excited.

He ran to the counter. Clark looked up.

"Hey, Tyler, how ya doing?"

Tyler nodded. "Great."

The boy waited. Waited for him to say. Oh, yeah. Got some mail for you. A couple of things. Here you go. Looks like they came from overseas.

Tyler waited.

But Clark shook his head. "Oh, sorry. Nothing from your dad today." Clark smiled. "Maybe tomorrow."

Tyler nodded. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the next day. He pushed away from the counter. He didn't feel like skipping anymore. And Kent didn't feel like a school anymore. It felt like a prison. Tyler started to turn away.

"Listen, your dad's busy flying those big jets and defending the country, Tyler. I bet he'll write to you just as soon as he gets a chance."

Tyler nodded and backed away another step from the counter.

“Sure. I know.” He forced a smile.

Tyler started to turn away. All of a sudden it felt terrible to be here, standing outside this room filled with mail, with postcards, letters, and packages—for everyone else.

But Sergeant Clark—his bald spot catching some of the light—leaned over the counter. “Say, Ty, I got a job for you. You came in with the new kid, right?”

Tyler nodded. Let me go, he thought. I just want to go. I don’t want any job. But he watched Clark bend down and pick up a package wrapped in brown paper, a big package. Why, it’s almost as big as I am, Tyler thought. A big box.

“Could you run this over to that new kid, Barclay? Could you do that for me?”

Tyler came closer to the counter, to the mysterious package, so big.

Tyler felt totally curious. He didn’t even know if he could lift it.

Clark lowered the package down to him, slowly. Tyler wrapped his arms around it, trying to make his hands touch, to lock his fingers together. But they didn’t touch. Tyler couldn’t see over the top of the package either.

“I—I don’t know,” Tyler said.

Clark laughed. “Hey, you’ll do fine. It ain’t too heavy, now is it?”

Tyler shook his head. It wasn’t heavy, but it sure was *big.*

“No, sir. I guess I’m okay.”

Tyler lowered the package a bit so he could see in front of him.

“Attaboy,” Clark said. “I appreciate it.”

Tyler turned, wobbly, and aimed himself down the corridor, toward the stairs leading down to the door and out of the administration building.

The box rattled in a funny kind of way.

Tyler played a game with himself as he walked. He played guess what’s in the box. Can’t be cookies and food, Tyler thought. That stuff was always heavy. No way I could lift a box filled with food.

Tyler felt the box slip a bit, and he had to slap against the side of the box to stop it from slipping out of his hands. And then he bounced into the wall, smacking his arm and the box hard.

“Ouch,” he said.

The box slipped a few more inches. Tyler took a deep breath. He tried to jiggle the box upward, but now it just slipped from his hands and crashed to the ground.

God, Tyler thought. I hope that there’s nothing important in there—nothing that could break.

Tyler crouched down beside the box and quickly picked it up. He gave it a shake, and something rattled inside. Something big, Tyler thought. He started walking again.

Okay, so it's not food, and it's too heavy for clothes, so—so—

What is it?

He got to the steps leading down. Tyler peered over the top of the box. He heard voices down there, and he saw the door. He took one step down. The box wobbled in his arms. He brought his other foot down. That's the way, one step at a time. That's the way, he thought.

Another step, and the box, the shiny brown wrapping paper so slick in his hands, slipped away. Tyler tried to stop it, but he felt as if he might fall. So he reached out for the handrail and let the box tumble down.

He heard it cartwheel down the steps. The edges of the steps smacked into the box, denting it.

Tyler stood there, frozen, while the box tumbled down the steps.

Oops, Tyler thought. I'm not doing such a good job at this.

Finally, the box came to rest, sliding across the floor leading to the door.

It was dented in a dozen places. The paper was torn, and Tyler saw a bit of color, some yellow and orange.

Tyler shook his head and went down the stairs to retrieve it. Thinking, whatever's in there is having a rough trip.

At the bottom of the stairs, Tyler crouched close to the box. He saw the torn flap of brown paper, the yellow, the orange. Bright yellow cardboard.

There was something familiar about that yellow, he thought. He saw a letter in red. A big *G.* The flap of paper was there. Tyler couldn't resist, he grabbed it and gave it just the tiniest pull.

Two more puffy letters came into view. Now he saw *GOO.*

Tyler held his breath. Could this be what I think it is? he thought. He gave the torn paper another small yank.

GOOD G—

He stopped.

"Oh, yeah, oh, great," he said, his voice echoing strangely in the tiled hallway. He grabbed the box and pulled it close, giving it a good rattle. Sure, that's the sound, yeah, that's the sound a Good Guy would make.

Wow! My new best friend, Andy Barclay, is getting a Good Guy.

"Most excellent!" he said.

Then Tyler looked at the dented box. That *wasn't* so great. Maybe

Andy would be mad. But then Tyler thought: Barclay's a big kid. He's sixteen. Would he even want a Good Guy doll?

No way! So what would he do with it?

Tyler said the magic words aloud.

"He'll give it to me."

Tyler hurriedly picked up the battered box and, using his butt to push open the doors, he left the administration building.

With every step across the quad, the box felt heavier. The only thing that kept Tyler going were the magic words.

It's a Good Guy. There's a *Good Guy* doll in here.

A few senior cadets watched him, grinning at him struggling to carry the box. But Tyler didn't let that bother him. Barclay was in the armory as usual at this time, and Tyler was going to see that he got his package.

He saw the gate leading to the armory, a place that Tyler had never been. They didn't let the little kids in the armory. He saw a sign: Authorized Personnel Only.

I could get in trouble, thought Tyler. But wait—Sergeant Clark asked me to deliver this, didn't he? No, he *ordered* me. I'm just following orders.

He entered the gate and walked up the steps into the stone building.

As soon as he opened the door, he heard gunshots from the back. Neat, he thought. This is great. This is where I'll learn to fire real guns, just like my dad.

Tyler stopped in the hall. Got to keep moving, he thought.

But where is Barclay?

Looking over the box, Tyler saw rows of guns and shelves filled with bullets, all protected by a mesh fence that went to the ceiling. Someone sat at a desk, behind the gate.

He's going to look up, Tyler thought, and ask me what I'm doing here.

Gotta move.

He turned left, moving down the hallway, the gunshots echoing from the firing range outside. There were giant windows on his left, and the afternoon sunlight poured in. The light hit the box. The yellow cardboard, the red letters, seemed electric, as if they were alive.

Where is Barclay? thought Tyler. I've never been in here before. He turned another corner. There were boxes here, stacks of boxes, probably filled with old school records. He saw a few doors, but they looked locked.

There was no one around. Tyler stopped. He put down the box.

He saw the yellow, the red.

GOOD G.

He pulled at the paper a bit more.

The full words leaped out, as if they were eager to be free.

It was too much, too much temptation, Tyler thought.

I just want to look. I just want to look at the doll, see it. Maybe take it out of its box. To touch it.

Then I'll hunt for Andy Barclay.

He looked around the deserted corridor. The gunshots echoed in the distance. So far away. There was no one around.

Just me, Tyler thought.

And this Good Guy.

He pulled the paper. The tearing sound was so loud.

10

Each tear of the paper sounded like a buzz saw, like the one Uncle Will used to cut down the dead tree in the backyard. And with every tear, Tyler looked around, just to make sure no one caught him.

I shouldn't be doing this, he thought. This isn't a good thing to be doing.

He grabbed another flap, releasing another wonderful explosion of yellow and orange and red. The front of the box was facing away from him. Tyler peeled some more of the paper off. It was just too wonderful.

He turned the box around, most of the wrapping paper off. And now he saw the doll behind a cellophane window, and its face, the smiling Good Guy face.

Tyler smiled back at it.

Then the face suddenly came to life—and with a blurringly fast head butt—the doll poked through the cellophane.

"God!" Tyler said.

He fell back on his bottom, hard, then scrunched away a few inches. Maybe I did something wrong, he thought. Maybe I did something that you're not supposed to do with Good Guys.

The doll pushed itself out of his box, headfirst, and then the little hands grabbed the outside of the box and he stepped through the broken cellophane window.

Tyler thought he heard the doll muttering to itself.

I didn't know they did that.

And this was like something he once saw. A bug, an insect, crawling out of an egg. Or something. Like it had to chew through this stuff. If it was going to get out, it had to chew its way out.

It was only a little bug. But it scared Tyler.

Like this.

Then the doll leaped out of the box and stood before Tyler.

These Good Guy dolls are fantastic, thought Tyler. Really amazing.

This one looked up at him and grinned. It was not a friendly grin, kind of a mean grin, like the faces Shelton's gang make. That kind of smile.

And the Good Guy said. "Who the *hell* are you?"

Now Tyler scrunched back another few inches—until the wall made

him stop. Good Guy dolls don't curse. They're supposed to be nice, Tyler thought. Maybe I broke this one when I dropped it. Maybe . . .

"C'mon, baldy, who the hell are you? And who's been playing basketball with the goddamned box!"

Tyler shook his head. The doll is talking to me! The doll can't really talk, can't really hear my answer.

Tyler opened his mouth. The stone floor felt cold. Now he wished someone would come.

"It—it isn't nice to swear. You're a Good Guy. I thought you could say only three sentences."

The doll took a step toward Tyler. Another step, and there was nowhere for Tyler to go.

The doll bent down, close, looking over Tyler.

"I'm new and improved."

Tyler nodded. "I—I never saw a doll like you before."

The doll nodded.

I'm talking to a doll, Tyler thought. That's impossible. I can't be talking to a doll. How can I be talking to a doll?

Is there a computer inside, a tiny computer that makes the doll talk? I thought Good Guys could only say. "Wanna play?" and "Let's be friends." And . . .

The doll backed up, looking left and right. Tyler didn't like the grin on its face. "Okay, kid, fun's over. Where the hell's Andy?"

Tyler shook his head. For a second he drew a blank on the name.

"Andy . . . ?"

The doll bent over and picked up some of the torn paper. "Here. Look. See. *Andy Barclay.* Can't you read? He was supposed to get this package." The doll stuck a hand out at Tyler and then raised a finger. "Did you know that tampering with mail is a federal offense, buddy boy? You could do some time in the slammer."

Tyler nodded.

Maybe I should get up, Tyler thought. Just stand up, and walk away from the crazy doll. It's broken. That's it. I broke it. There's something very wrong with this doll.

And maybe I shouldn't have opened the box. It was addressed to Barclay.

"I'm sorry," Tyler said. "Is Andy your best friend?"

The doll's smile broadened. Almost a real smile now, Tyler thought. A big, happy grin. The doll pounded the empty box and it made a thumping sound. "My friend? Why he's more than that, baldy. Andy's my new lease on life. Hey . . ."

The doll's smile faded. I don't like the way his face changes so much, Tyler thought. One minute he's happy, and the next . . .

"Just wait a sec, here." The doll looked like he was thinking, figuring things out. "I've got a new body."

The doll looked down at itself. Tyler didn't know what he was talking about.

I could stand up, Tyler told himself. I could run down the hall. The doll has only little legs, and . . .

"And I ain't told anyone my little secret yet. No sir. Nobody knows that I'm"—the doll looked at Tyler—*"back."*

The doll walked around to Tyler's side. He put a doll hand on Tyler's shoulder. The boy smiled. It felt creepy.

Real creepy. Like the time he stayed up late and watched a horror show. It was called *Monsters.* And there was this stuffed animal that came to life. Except it wasn't a stuffed animal, and when it opened up its mouth, it had all these *teeth.*

Tyler cried that night, while trying to fall asleep in the dark.

The small doll hand patted him.

Tyler looked at the Good Guy's face, all friendly now, just like in the TV commercials.

"So, kid—what's your name?"

Tyler smiled back.

"Tyler," He gulped, and then said, "What's yours?"

The smile grew even broader. "Chucky." He leaned close, putting his doll mouth right next to Tyler's ear. Tyler felt the tiny breath of his whisper.

"But my real name is Charles Lee Ray."

Tyler nodded.

Wanting the doll hand to let him go.

Wanting Chucky's mouth to move away from his ear. He thought he smelled something on that breath. Something more than new plastic and the smell of cardboard. Something he didn't like.

But Chucky kept his hand on Tyler's shoulder.

The cadet firing range was behind the armory.

Andy looked at the gun and wondered how he should hold it. Despite watching countless movies with well-armed drug dealers and Nazis getting blown away, Andy didn't have a clue how to hold the rifle.

He squinted, trying to line the gun sight up with the target. But it felt all wrong. Maybe I should try the other shoulder, he thought. He

shifted the gun, but that felt even more bizarre.

The noise out here in the shooting range was loud even through his muffling headgear.

He felt someone behind him. He turned and saw Whitehurst, shaking his head.

Andy pushed the headgear away, hearing the crackling pops that filled the room.

"What am I doing wrong?"

"Do you want a list?" Whitehurst joked.

And Andy grinned.

He also saw De Silva, in the next stall, leaning down and taking aim. Andy saw her target filled with black dots clustered around the bull's-eye.

"Looks like we have Annie Oakley here," Andy said.

Whitehurst didn't hear him and gestured, putting a hand to his ears.

Andy repealed the words, "Annie Oakley here."

De Silva turned and looked at him, a big smile on her face.

What a woman, Andy thought. Not only is she gorgeous, not only can she build a mean rope bridge, but she's even a hell of a shot.

Andy smiled back. Then, he said, "Is there anything you can't do?"

De Silva put down her gun and nodded. She came closer to Andy.

"Can't cook worth a damn."

Whitehurst cleared his throat. "Er, Barclay, meet De Silva."

Andy stuck out a hand and De Silva look it. A strong handshake, but still, somehow, amazingly feminine.

"Hi. You're new?" she said. "That can be tough."

"Tell me about it." Andy felt her powerful stare, as though she were taking him all in, seeing everything.

No, Andy thought. Not everything.

Nobody sees everything.

He moved his eyes away, breaking the contact. He gestured at his gun. "So, you wanna show me how to shoot—before I do damage to myself?"

De Silva laughed. "Sure."

She walked to Andy's gun, while Whitehurst gave Andy a nudge to the ribs. When Andy looked up, Whitehurst was rolling his eyes. Apparently De Silva wasn't usually this friendly. Andy felt himself redden.

"Okay, Barclay. First thing you have to do is grab the gun correctly. Here," she said, extending the rifle to him.

Andy took the gun and started to aim the way he had before, leaning on the counter, taking aim at the target.

"No," De Silva came up behind him. She leaned over him, and Andy felt her body pressing against him. Yeah, he thought, like I'm really thinking about shooting now.

"Okay, get the stock right into your shoulder." De Silva pushed the gun stock back until it was tight against Andy's shoulder.

He started to squint, taking aim.

"No. Don't squint. Keep both eyes open. Eventually you'll see through the sight just fine."

De Silva used her hand to push Andy's cheek close to the gun. Then, she actually leaned close to him, looking at the sight of his gun. Close enough so that Andy could smell just a hint of perfume. And there was the wonderful scent of just-washed hair.

"Okay. Looks good," she said. "Now, here's the important part, Barclay. Keep your sight on the target. Hold your breath. You don't want to move at all."

Andy did as ordered.

"Now, squeeze the trigger. Nice and gently. Squeeze it . . . don't pull it."

Andy put a small amount of pressure on the trigger. He felt it give, just a little.

"Nice and easy . . ."

De Silva's body pressed close against him.

I wonder, he thought, does she know that she's driving me crazy? I'm going to do more than fire this gun if she doesn't slide off me.

"That's it," she whispered. "Squeeze."

The gun fired. Andy let out his breath.

He looked up. His target remained unmarked.

"Damn."

De Silva's voice was close to him. "You're not concentrating."

You got a point there, he thought. At least, I'm not concentrating on marksmanship.

"Try again."

Andy nodded. De Silva was still close to him, looking through the sight, checking that the gun was held tight.

"Squeeze."

Another blast, and Andy looked up and saw that the target hadn't been touched.

Andy rushed the next shot, another miss.

He looked at De Silva, who shook her head. “Just keep at it,” she said.

“That was great, you know,” Andy said. De Silva looked at him, not understanding. “What you did to Shelton, back there at formation.”

De Silva smiled. “Well, Shelton’s a major dick.”

“Tell me about it. The guy thinks he’s in *Full Metal Jacket.”*

De Silva laughed. “Yeah, and I’ll fry his buns every opportunity I get.” She gestured at his gun. “Back to school. Go ahead, take some more shots.”

Andy nodded. He leaned on the counter and pressed his cheek close to the gun. He forced both his eyes to stay open. He pulled the trigger.

And Whitehurst slapped his back.

“Hey, guy, you hit it,” Whitehurst said. “You nicked the damn target just there, in the corner. Way to go!”

Andy turned to De Silva. She nodded, quite pleased with herself, and moved back to her gun.

“Well, there’s plenty of room for improvement,” she said.

And Andy heard Whitehurst giggle.

11

This kid is a sucker, thought Chucky.

Everybody's a sucker. Everybody's waiting for someone to feed them a line. So damned eager to give away their money, their life, their soul.

But this was too easy.

Old Andy boy at least made it interesting.

And oh, will I fix that little bastard. Though he ain't so little anymore. Still, our day of reckoning is coming. This mess could have been cleared up years ago if he hadn't made life so difficult for me.

This kid Tyler, though, is just perfect. Real polite and interested. So interested in Good Guys that, yes siree! he'll get to *be* one.

In just a few seconds.

"Tyler, I want to play a game with you."

Chucky forced one of those trademarked Good Guy smiles. He had to force his chubby plastic cheeks up.

I'm one Good Guy, he thought, who's far more comfortable with a sneer. That dopey smile just ain't natural on me.

Tyler smiled, eyes wide. He's with me now, Chucky thought. Just got to lay off the cursing. Got to act like the dopey dolls in the commercials. Friends to the end. Hidey-ho!

Which should be in about five minutes.

"Sure!" Tyler said. "I like games."

Chucky pushed Tyler on his chest. "Great, buddy boy. All you gotta do is lie down, and . . ."

Tyler slid down to lie on the floor. Such a cooperative boy. Absolutely stellar. Though looking at the boy in his uniform, Chucky did see a problem.

I'll have to get out of this GI junior academy here. Getting myself to the Play Pals mail room, and all wrapped up, had been mostly an exercise in careful planning. Getting out of here may not be too easy. He felt the smile slip from his face.

Tyler's face looked concerned as he lay on the floor.

"What's this game called?"

Chucky smiled. "It's called swap the soul, Tyler. And you're going to love it." He patted the boy's chest.

He looked at him. What is this kid—six, seven years old? Chucky wondered. How many years until he hits puberty? That was something to think about.

Chucky blinked his eyes. I'm such a cute doll, he thought, irresistible.

"Whatever you say, Charles."

He patted Tyler's chest. Yes, whatever I say. Such a cooperative boy. He patted the boy's chest one more time, and then let his hand rest on his chest.

He closed his eyes. But he kept the smile.

Don't want to alarm the little brat. Gotta keep that smile. Chucky took a breath.

Remembering: With every hour, this doll's body becomes more my body.

And he remembered fighting Andy, getting so close. And then—damn—there was always something to interrupt us.

He said the words, slowly, letting their power fill the hallways.

"Ade due, Damballa."

Another breath. "*Ade due,* Damballa . . . give me the power I beg of you. Give me . . ."

The large window to the left rattled. The wind, pressing against it responding. It felt so wonderful to feel its power—a living thing, responding to my words, the power of mighty Damballa.

The sunlight vanished. Masked by dark clouds that had suddenly appeared. Great billowy, metal gray clouds that swallowed the sun, blotting out the blue sky. They sunk rapidly low, lower, to the earth.

The wind whistled through the cracks around the window.

Mighty Damballa.

Very mighty.

Chucky thought of the one time he saw Mighty Damballa. Once was enough. Enough to last a lifetime.

The old black man, the *gris-gris* shaman didn't seem to have the goods.

Oh, he had lizard feet and weird powders that flashed when he threw them into fires and books and candles and a toothless grin that was just about the most demented thing Charles Lee Ray had ever seen.

But so far, his mumbo-jumbo bullshit hadn't done too much for old Charles Ray.

Though there had been a few things. He felt less fear walking into people's homes, their apartments, as though he were truly

impermeable, protected by the spirit world.

Charles Lee Ray felt *something.*

But then the old shaman got scared. He acted scared, as if I were going to take his precious religion and maybe do something real bad with it.

Damn right, I was. And cutting the heads off chickens and sacrificing neighborhood cats wasn't going to get me where I wanted to go.

Damballa would want more.

If there was a Damballa.

The old man didn't know anything about the sacrifice. He didn't have to. By that time, Charles Lee Ray had the ceremony down.

I'm just going to change the offering.

He remembered smiling at that. That's all.

And ask for one thing. To see for a second—this Damballa. To know whether he—she, it—was real. Or am I wasting my time with this *gris-gris.*

The old shaman didn't have to know. That was a line he obviously didn't want to cross.

Charles Ray remembered.

He had caught the woman in the apartment building, after chasing her through the storage room under the exposed pipes. She had screamed, but there'd been no one to hear.

He had hurried. He remembered that he'd hurried. No telling who might come along, he had thought. Someone might stumble along, discover me, and screw the whole thing up.

He had tied the woman up, gagged her. She'd been pretty. But that had not been a concern. That hadn't been a focal point.

He'd used the old holy man's knife. Just the added touch. Thinking: I'll return it later.

The woman had been gagged. She had barely made a sound. But she sure had tried to scream when she saw my knife, glistening even here, even in the gloom of the basement. She'd kicked at the ropes holding her fast. So frantic.

Charles Lee Ray couldn't believe how exciting it was.

How wonderful, how . . .

The boy moved under his doll hand. Impatient for the game to begin.

His reminiscing was interrupted.

The wind howled, animal-like, right outside. The window rattled. The light vanished so thoroughly that it grew hard to see in the hall.

The clouds were that dark.

The boy moved, still smiling, still oblivious of what was going on here.

Isn't innocence grand?

"Ade due. Damballa . . . grant me the power, *Kenyu,* Damballa. *nictu* . . . Grant . . ."

The wind whistled shrilly.

Andy put down his gun. First, he had felt the cold wind chilling his nearly bald head, he looked up. Dark rainclouds were rolling in fast.

He opened his mouth.

No, Andy thought. I'm being silly. It's just a storm, just a thunderhead rolling down the valley.

But still the thought, the memory was there. Of clouds that seemed to ooze out of the sky, blotting out all light and color. Of wind that whipped in every direction at once.

The gun felt cold and heavy in his hands. Useless.

Darker, the clouds congealed into an inky blackness.

Andy felt himself shaking. Oh, god, he thought. I'm scared. All these years, and I'm scared.

Still scared . . . after so many years.

Chucky felt the surge of power. The wonderful presence of Damballa. Here, with him now. Ready to make the miracle happen.

To get me out of this damn little doll's body.

As if I hadn't been patient.

He saw the boy looking out the window at the clouds. He probably finds them scary. Think that's scary, kid? I can show you scary.

Maybe you would like to hear what happened to me.

When I first saw him. When I first saw Damballa.

First and only time. And believe me, once is enough.

"Levee mercier du bois challoint, secoisse—"

Chucky closed his eyes.

And—even now—he could see him.

The girl had kicked at the ropes, a heart-warming sight. All tied up and no place to go. And Charles Lee Ray had taken his time bringing the knife up to her. Because the *gris-gris* books said that fear was the key, the wild-eyed look of terror.

That was the grease that made the engine run.

Besides, it was fun.

He'd brought the knife to her neck. He'd muttered the words, the entreaty, the call to Damballa for a personal consultation.

And deep down, Charles Lee Ray hadn't believed that anything would happen. He'd been about to chuck the whole routine as so much bullshit. So much Caribbean hoo-hah.

He'd touched the girl's neck with the knife. It was like drawing with a fine-point red pen. He'd traced a line from ear to ear, as prescribed, letting the old vital juices flow. And then down, to cover her body with the powerful symbols.

The building had shaken.

It had seemed, then, to Charles Ray that the whole building vibrated. He'd stood up and dropped the knife. It's an earthquake. An earthquake in Chicago, he'd thought.

He didn't know they had earthquakes in Chicago.

The lights—150 watt bulbs running along the ceiling—had started to fade, slowly, as if they'd been attached to a romantic dimmer. Time for a cozy tête-à-tête.

The blood had started to spread onto the floor. Touching Charles Lee Ray's feet.

Then a cloud, a black cloud, had formed in the basement. Looks like rain. Earthquakes and now an indoor thunderstorm. Now ain't that something?

Then . . .

There had been something in the cloud. It had had a shape. But it had been difficult to make out that shape. Because an armlike thing had came out with three curved fingers. And then another, and another, until the room had been *filled* with them. And the smell . . .

Charles Lee Ray remembered opening his mouth, gulping at the air. He would have to be crazy to use his nostrils.

A body. Gray, like the clouds, wet, covered with some slick, oily liquid. It lives in some pool, a pool of the damned at the end of the universe.

Damballa. The soul catcher. The eater of spirits.

A head had emerged. A soup bowl of eyes with an opening. A mouth filled with green gray tongues, licking at the fetid air of the basement, savoring it.

At that point, Charles Lee Ray remembered falling down. Onto the red pool. He hadn't even noticed what he'd fallen into.

"Okay," he had said. "I'm okay. I can deal with this."

After all, I called it, didn't I? I summoned the thing. And now it's

here.

And then a fistfull of the eyes had fixed Charles Lee Ray and had spoken to him directly. Briefly, but directly.

Without sound, without words. Telling him that this day starts a new beginning. From this day forward, Charles Lee Ray has a master, someone to serve. His life has a goal, a purpose.

And that is wonderful.

To drive home the point, Damballa had let Charles feel the beauty, the magnificence of being on Mighty Damballa's good side.

Then—quickly, a lightning bolt from the black cloud—he'd let him feel its opposite.

Charles Lee Ray had curled up, howling, cursing, slipping in the red pool of his sacrifice. He'd felt the arms move beside him, doing something. But Charles Ray had closed his eyes, alone now and terrified.

Point made, Damballa had disappeared.

The cloud had disappeared, the earthquake ended. The row of naked light bulbs had flickered back to full brightness.

And when Charles Ray had looked up he was still kneeling in the red pool.

But there was no body.

The body of the girl, the sacrifice was gone.

Damballa had taken his cut—and then split. Charles Lee Ray had stood up, with the smell, the taste of the creature still filling his senses.

And he would never lose it completely.

Like now.

Though Damballa won't appear—though this isn't a call to Damballa, just your basic switching of bodies—Chucky could feel his presence, his approval.

Tyler's face didn't look so happy anymore.

"What do those words mean?" the boy said.

"Secoisse entienne mais pois de . . ."

I have to hurry, Chucky thought. The boy tried to sit up, but Chucky kept pressing him down with his hand, pressing, and . . .

Then Chucky heard footsteps moving down the hall.

12

"Oh, shit!"

Tyler looked up at the doll. "Charles, stop swearing. It's not nice to swear."

But Tyler saw the doll aiming a plastic ear down the hallway. Tyler heard the footsteps. Oh, I'm in trouble now, thought Tyler. Opening Barclay's package, playing with a doll, and . . .

Chucky took his hand off Tyler's chest. Tyler quickly sat up and saw Colonel Cochrane walking toward him, followed by one of the senior cadets. Oh, no, thought Tyler. Cochrane was real strict, a real military guy.

"Now we're in for it," he said to Chucky. But when he looked at the doll, its face was expressionless. It was just a doll. "Hey, what's wrong? Your batteries give out? What's . . ."

Tyler heard Cochrane talking.

He doesn't see me yet, Tyler thought. That's good, except that there's no place to run to.

"We'll need three twenty-two-caliber semis, Curtis. Mark them for the red and blue teams, and . . ."

Tyler stood up. Chucky just lay there. Just a doll now.

Cochrane stopped.

"Tyler? What are you doing here? This is off limits to your grade. Whatever are you doing here? And—what's this?"

Tyler watched Cochrane walk forward and pick up Chucky by his orange hair.

The doll didn't say "hidey-ho" or "wanna play" or anything.

"What is *this?"* Cochrane held the doll out as though it smelled bad, as though it was some stinky laundry, a dead fish.

Tyler smiled. "We were playing, sir. We were playing swap the soul."

Cochrane shook his head. It looked like he had never heard of the game either. "Swap the soul, hmmm? And you're playing with a doll?"

"We were playing. I . . ."

Cochrane turned to the senior cadet. "Go on, Curtis. I'll catch up with you later." Curtis left and then the colonel turned back to Tyler.

He dangled the doll in front of Tyler. Tyler looked away, out the window. Funny, the clouds were gone. The storm never came. He

even saw bits of blue in the sky.

Cochrane shook his head. “We don’t play with dolls, now do we, Tyler? Dolls are for girls.”

The colonel waved Chucky back and forth.

The doll is smiling, Tyler saw. He’s still smiling. Tyler stood up. “But Charles—Chucky—is my new best friend.”

Cochrane frowned, and then shook his head. “Tyler . . . you know better than to talk back to a superior officer.”

Tyler looked down at the torn wrapping paper, the box with the hole through the cellophane window. I liked the doll, Tyler thought. It wasn’t mine, but it was a friend, someone I could play with, someone I could talk to.

His eyes trailed up to Cochrane’s hand swinging the doll. “You know better, Tyler.”

Tyler nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Cochrane smiled. Then he pointed at the paper and the Good Guy box. “Now clean that stuff up.” He hoisted Chucky higher. “And I’ll take care of this.”

What is he going to do to it? Tyler thought. And what will I tell Barclay?

But he knew the answer to that one.

Nothing. I will tell Barclay nothing. He would get mad, and then I’d really have no friends.

Cochrane turned and started walking out.

Tyler watched his pal, his Good Guy, dangling from behind. Tyler saw his cheeks, his eyes.

Chucky blinked. Once, and then again. He smiled—it wasn’t a nice smile. And Chucky whispered.

“I’ll be back.”

And Chucky waved at him.

Tyler waved back and said, quietly, believing the doll . . . somehow believing the doll.

“See you later, Charles.”

Colonel Cochrane disappeared with the doll.

Andy tried to twirl his gun like the other cadets, but it was no go.

You don’t jump into this stuff and just pick it up, he thought. Everyone was following Shelton’s barked orders so smoothly, turning left, turning right, swinging their .22s smoothly one way and the other. Everyone looks real sharp, he thought. Everyone but me.

"Left, hut!" Shelton barked.

Andy was a beat behind the rest of the cadets.

"Right, hut—present arms."

It was gun-swinging time, and Andy tried to flick his gun to the right, smoothly, the way everyone else did.

It nearly slipped away.

Andy saw De Silva, down the line, moving as though she could lead the squad.

"Left, hut!"

When Andy looked forward, he saw Shelton, watching him, a disgusted look on his face. Andy flipped his gun back left. And this time it went flying out of his hands and landed on the muddy grass.

He started to crouch down to get it. He heard snickers, and Whitehurst whispered, "Nice move, Barclay."

"I'm trying, damn it."

But then Shelton was there, in his face, screaming, "Company, halt!"

Andy tried to look ahead, putting on his best what-me-worry expression with a glazed look of unconcern.

Er, why did this bus stop, sir?

Shelton bent down and picked up Andy's rifle, all muddy now.

He looked at the gun and then up at Andy. "It's not a baton, Barclay. You look like a goddamn majorette out there."

The other cadets rewarded Shelton's wit with some giggles.

But Shelton didn't smile. Shelton shook his head, looking at the muddy gun, and then he flung it at Andy.

Andy barely got his hands up to stop the weapon before it smashed into his midsection.

Now Shelton laughed. "What's the matter, Barclay? You act as if you're afraid of it." Shelton came closer. "You're not afraid of your weapon, are you, Barclay? A soldier's rifle is his best—" He pushed the rifle at Andy "—friend." Shelton nodded. He took a breath. "Remember that."

Andy nodded.

And then, past Shelton, he saw an officer. Colonel Cochrane, walking out of the armory, moving around the back. He was dragging something behind him.

Andy's mouth fell open.

"What is it, Barclay? Cat got your tongue?"

Dragging something red and blue.

Andy shook his head.

“What, Barclay?”

Thinking. No, it can’t be! That’s crazy.

But Andy saw the red sneakers, the cute Good Guy sneakers. And the blue overalls. And the man was holding the doll by the hair, by the brilliant red hair that made Andy sick.

It can’t be, he thought. Why would he have a Good Guy doll? And what is he doing with it? It can’t be.

Shelton backed away, shaking his head.

“Company—right, hut!” Shelton yelled.

The cadets started moving, marching away from the armory.

Andy looked over his shoulder, watching the man disappear, taking the doll behind the building.

“Snap out of it!” Whitehurst said.

Andy kept glancing over his shoulder.

He remembered the clouds from before, the sudden thunderhead.

It’s clear now, he thought, nice and clear.

Cochrane was gone, behind the building. The doll was gone.

Andy looked ahead. It can’t be, he thought.

It’s over.

I ended it . . . years ago.

He felt the sun now, and there was no wind. And he almost believed that he was right.

13

Well, if it isn't Patton himself!

Yeah, thought Fast Al, looking at the pretend officer walking toward the garbage cans. What we got here is a regular three star Boy Scout leader.

Al jiggled a can of garbage into the back of his garbage truck. The dumpster was full, and there were cans around it, all of them full. The slop from the kitchen smelled disgusting.

Never catch me sending my kids here. All that stupid marching and playing with guns.

Al spit into the open maw of the back of the truck. Into the nut crusher, as he called it.

He watched the toy soldier walk up to one of the full cans.

He won't even look at me, Al thought. Just wait. The guy's carrying something to throw away, and he won't even look at me.

Al stood there, watching him. Go ahead, buddy. Pretend you don't see me. Go ahead.

He watched the man push something into an already full can.

Hey, genius! Can't you see? The can's *full.*

Then Al saw what he pushed into the can. It was a doll. Aw, somethin' the matter with your widdle dolly? Or did you steal it from one of the brats who goes to this concentration camp?

The man turned from the garbage can.

Probably holding his breath, Al thought. The officer walked away, back to the front of the building. Al shook his head as he snatched up another garbage can. A great white pile of what looked like mashed potatoes sat on top of the can.

Al took a big snort of air. It had looked like rain before, like a real nasty thunderhead was rolling in. But, hey . . . it was gone now. Things looked okay now. He did not like working in the rain.

He tossed the can of kitchen scraps into the back of his truck, getting it nice and full before making the nut crusher bite down.

He snatched another can, dumped it, and the garbage was up to the lip at the back.

"Okay," Al said, "it's chow time." He reached up for the lever and pulled it down. The engine whined and a big metal flap started pressing down on the garbage, pushing it down and into the truck. Al

heard the snaps and pops of crushing cans and plastic, surrounded by a constant gushy sound.

Damn, it was a powerful sound.

Then he moved the lever up, and the metal flap quickly slid back up, awaiting another pile of garbage.

"Okay," Al said to himself. It didn't concern him that he talked to himself. Not at all. After all, who else was there to talk to?

He shook his head and laughed. "Nobody." That's who.

He grabbed two more cans and dumped them in. He threw the empty cans onto the ground, and they rolled away. He liked the idea of the toy soldiers bending down and picking up the scummy cans.

Al grabbed the can with the doll. It was jabbed headfirst into the can. Use to be, he'd bring something like that home for his kids. Used to be.

But they were older now. They liked other things. Things Al didn't want to know about.

He watched the doll with red and blue coveralls tumble into the dumpster. He saw the doll's hair, a big bright mop of red hair. *Weird looking doll.* Al laughed.

"Never lose it in a crowd."

No sir.

He tossed the empty can away and pulled the lever down. Got to back the truck up now, he thought. Pick up the dumpster. Then, I'm outta here. Hi-yo, Silver, and on to my next stop.

And Fast Al, one of the quickest trash handlers in Cook County, walked to the front of his truck, the compactor whining behind him.

When he heard a voice.

"Help! Hel-l-p!"

He stopped dead in his tracks. "Jesus," he said, turning to the back. It was a voice, a goddamn kid's voice coming from the compactor!

Jesus H. Christ!

"Help!" the voice screamed.

Oh, God. How did a kid get in there, Al thought? How in the hell did a kid get in there?!

He threw the lever, just as it started to press against the garbage. Al waited, praying. Please let the voice still be there.

He looked at the garbage, just starting to be pressed together. There's a kid in there.

"Help me! I'm stuck."

"Okay, kid. Okay. I hear you. You're okay. Now what I'm gonna do . . . what I'm gonna do is, I'm gonna throw the lever the other way.

Open up the compactor. Get you right out, okay? You got it?"

"Help me."

Fast Al took his time to look at the lever, at the switches. Had to get this right or the kid is so much toothpaste, squeezed flat.

He threw a switch up and then grabbed the lever. That should do it.

"Hang in there, kid. Just hang in there."

Al pulled on the lever, and the giant metal flap of the compactor started coming up.

Phew, Al thought.

Al looked at the sea of garbage, the colorful mixture of paper and food and wrappers and magazines.

He didn't see any little boy.

"What the . . ."

Al bent over the pile and started sifting through the garbage. Where is the kid? Al pushed away garbage with his gloved hands, digging deeper into the pile.

"Hey, kid? You still in here?" he said, talking to the garbage. Thinking: This has gotta look crazy, me plowing through the garbage, talking to it.

He didn't imagine the kid's voice, did he? He didn't imagine that?

Al climbed into the mouth of the back of the truck, kicking at the garbage, digging at it.

Deeper, to a layer of crushed garbage that had already started being pressed together, forming a weird new substance.

"Hey, kid," Al yelled. "Where the hell are you . . . ?"

That was close, Chucky thought. Real close. Too close.

He popped up on the side and saw the garbage man—thank Damballa he's got ears—on his knees, digging through the garbage. Quickly, Chucky jumped outside the truck.

"Hey, kid!" he heard the garbage man yell into the back of his truck. Poor slob didn't see me, Chucky thought.

C'est la vie.

Chucky looked up and saw a big metal stick, a lever. And a switch that had worn, raised letters. *Open* . . . and *close.* He threw the switch. The click was barely audible. Yeah, especially if you had your head stuck in garbage.

Then Chucky reached up to the lever. His hand closed around it and pulled down.

The mechanical jaw started down.

Chucky watched the garbage man look up, horrified. The man turned to the lips of the truck and tried to stand up in the garbage, to get away from the mouth about to crunch down.

Chucky watched. This is kind of interesting, he thought. Will he make it or won't he?

Chucky shook his head.

The garbage man's mouth was open, screaming.

"No . . . !"

He slipped on some garbage, lost his footing, and went crashing down on the pile of garbage.

Ooops, Chucky thought. The metal flap of the compactor was right over him. Chucky bent down. He watched the garbage man scramble on top of the garbage, clawing his way forward.

Chucky shook his head again. Not enough time. The opening, the gap to freedom, shrunk to a foot. The garbage man's hands closed around the lip. The opening shrunk some more, to just inches.

That's it, Chucky thought. He's snagged. Chucky, bent down, could see the garbage man's face pressed into the garbage. And he saw that face look over and see Chucky looking back.

"Hidey-ho," Chucky said.

The man screamed.

And the scream grew, swelled, as the compactor went flush to the garbage, and still pressed down.

Amazing, thought Chucky. I can still hear him, can still—

More screams, and Chucky looked around.

Now, he thought, where was I . . . ?

Coming off the firing range, Ellis made Andy's squad jog around the armory.

Well, thought Andy, if nothing else I'll be in great shape by the time I'm out of here. And that was something he had best work on. Getting out of here, and soon.

They jogged to the back of the armory, and Andy heard the whine of a garbage truck, and then . . .

Screaming.

Muffled, horribly muffled, but someone was screaming.

Ellis stopped the company. Andy was in front, looking at the truck.

The screaming stopped.

"What the . . ." Whitehurst said, panting.

Ellis took a step toward the truck. He flicked the lever. The garbage

truck stopped grinding down.

Then someone said, “Oh, my god . . .”

Andy looked. Red goo started dripping from the back of the truck, oozing from the seams of the jaw. Dripping onto the ground.

The screams had stopped.

Ellis walked to the truck.

He reached for the lever, to start the jaws moving up.

Someone’s in there, Andy thought. Someone is in there, and now . . .

He’s dead.

The blood kept dripping. The back of the truck looked like a crusty mouth, drooling red.

Andy heard someone hacking behind him. Someone tossed his cookies.

Andy just stood there with the other cadets, waiting, witnesses, while Ellis raised the lever and opened the truck’s mouth.

14

Incredibly enough, Andy watched everyone drift to their classes. A military school could not come to a stop just because someone died. Forward men, and don't forget your notebooks.

Andy went to his history class. He sat near the back, looking out the window, not really listening to the teacher, a woman, drone on.

He kept thinking about things, disconnected things, disturbing things.

Cochrane with the doll.

The garbage man crushed to death. He must have been drunk, Whitehurst had said.

Andy nodded.

The teacher, Sergeant Frazier, looked like an emaciated owl, her hair pulled back tight, her body all bones. She carried a pointer.

"Napoleon waged an assault, unprecedented in the history of Europe—unprecedented in its scope, its ambition."

Andy looked out the window, at the afternoon sky, darkening. I think . . . I think I have to get out of here.

"But as we've seen, his campaign was destined to end at Waterloo." Frazier took a step closer to Andy, pointer at the ready. "Can you tell us why, Mr. Barclay?"

Andy heard his name and snapped around. Sergeant Frazier had him fixed with her beady eyes, ready to pounce. Andy licked his lips. The other cadets looked over at him. Most did nothing to hide their smiles.

"Er, what was the question?"

Laughter. The crowd in the arena was glad that someone else faced the hungry lion.

Frazier shook her head. "I realize that we're all shaken up by what happened today, but let's make an effort, shall we, Mr. Barclay?"

Andy nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry."

Having drawn first blood. Frazier smiled. She turned back to her map, pointer at the ready. "Napoleon's defeat boiled down to this: He was overconfident. He underestimated the enemy. And that is the cardinal sin in warfare, ladies and gentlemen. Never underestimate the enemy . . ."

Andy listened. Thoughtful. Upset.

Andy heard taps sounding over the field, a mournful sound marking the end of a damned mournful day. Looking out the window of his room, he saw two cadets with trumpets and two other cadets bringing down the flag. The sun was down, below the hills. Andy touched the glass.

Is this worse than the foster homes? Or better?

He didn't know.

He went back to his bed and picked up the pocketknife Tyler had given him. He opened it and shut it, still upset, disturbed.

Whitehurst was spit polishing dress shoes. Already they gleamed.

Whitehurst looked up. "Hey, better get unpacked, Barclay. Shelton loves to stage surprise inspections."

Andy nodded. He closed the pocketknife and put it on his desk. He grabbed his duffel bag and started taking out the clothes he hadn't unpacked yet.

"What are you doing?" Andy said.

Whitehurst shook his head. Duh . . . "What's it look like I'm doing? I'm polishing Shelton's shoes."

"What? He makes you polish his shoes?"

Whitehurst laughed. "No, I offered to do it out of the kindness of my heart. Jeez."

Andy watched Whitehurst spit on the tip of one shoe and then buff the spot into a reflective gloss.

Andy knew what was bothering him. He decided to mention it to Whitehurst. I need all the friends I can get, he thought. Every single last one of them.

"Whitehurst, did you see Cochrane with that doll today?"

Whitehurst looked up and squinted. "No. A doll? What doll?"

Andy took a breath. "He was carrying a Good Guy doll." Another breath. "Just before the accident in the garbage truck."

Whitehurst nodded, and then went back to Shelton's shoes. "Oh, Good Guys. I remember those."

"Yeah, me too."

"But nope. Can't say I saw that. Cochrane doesn't look like the doll-playing type." Whitehurst laughed.

Andy looked down at his clothes. He pushed the pile closer to the trunk at the foot of his bed.

"There!" Whitehurst said. Andy looked over, just in time to catch Whitehurst spitting inside one shoe, and then letting the phlegmy goo drip from the heel down to the toe. "The finishing touch for old Shelton."

Andy grinned.

Whitehurst stood up and grabbed his shaving kit. “I’m gonna get washed up, Barclay. Lights out in a few minutes.”

“Right,” Andy said.

Whitehurst left the room. Andy turned to his duffel bag and took out some more clothes.

Well, now, Chucky thought, sitting in the dark. Sounds like old Andy boy is all alone.

Maybe he would like a little company.

Chucky stood up, inside Andy’s big footlocker. I can smell it, Chucky thought . . . the smell of a stream of cadets with their smelly jockstraps and dirty socks. That worries me. My senses are kicking in fast.

The meter is running.

Chucky pushed opened the lid.

He saw Andy, sorting his clothes, tossing some in the bottom of his closet.

Chucky pushed the lid open higher.

It’s almost family reunion time.

And won’t he be glad to see me?

Friends to the end.

But then the door to the room opened. Chucky popped down into the blackness and heard the other kid, the porker, talking.

Whitehurst came back, scratching his head.

“Yo, Barclay. Jeez, I almost forgot. Sergeant Clark wanted to know if you got your package?”

“What package?”

“He said that you got a package in the mail and that the little squirt Tyler was bringing it over to you. You didn’t get it?”

Andy shook his head. A package? Who would send me a package? Who do I know that would send me a package?

“No, I got nothing.”

Whitehurst shrugged. “Well, Clark wanted me to ask.” Whitehurst started out the door again. “You might want to check with Tyler.”

And Whitehurst was gone.

That’s strange, thought Andy. He grabbed his socks, scooping them up in both arms, and walked to his trunk. He crouched down and caught the lid of the trunk with his shoulder.

Slowly, Andy started easing it up, higher, higher until he could flip it wide open.

He looked inside. It was empty. Nothing left but the poor soul who passed through this room. Andy let his socks tumble. Then he grabbed his pants and shirts and put them in there.

I don't have much, he thought. My world, my life has kind of shrunk lately. He slammed the lid of the trunk down, and turned back to his desk.

He stopped.

The pocketknife had been *there.*

Right on top of the desk.

It had been there, and now it's not.

Did Whitehurst take it? thought Andy. Wouldn't that be a bummer. A kleptomaniac for a roommate. Or maybe it slipped to the floor. Maybe I'm losing my mind, and I never even put it there.

He patted his pants pocket, feeling nothing.

Then Andy crouched down on the floor, looking under the desk, under the bed.

He caught the flash of the blade out of the corner of his eye. The hand holding the blade. A tiny hand, malformed.

The knife sliced out and cut his ankle. Andy screamed and rolled backward. He reached up to grab at the bed, to stop his fall. But he grabbed the open duffel bag, pulling it to the floor. Some more clothes fell out and his copy of *Playboy.*

Andy smacked against the floor.

And he looked straight ahead, under his bunk, and watched Chucky come out, from the shadows, knife in hand. Wearing that same sick smile that haunted Andy's dreams.

"No," Andy moaned. He grabbed at his ankle to stop the bleeding. "No . . ."

Chucky stood up, pointing the blade right at him.

Andy shook his head. I've gone crazy. This isn't real, this can't be.

"Long time no see, pal. Looking good."

No. Andy shook his head. "You're dead. We killed you."

The doll, the madman, took another step toward Andy, the knife point leading the way. "Well, you know what they say, buddy boy . . ." The doll laughed. "You just can't keep a Good Guy down."

Chucky shifted the blade to his other hand, then back again, enjoying Andy's terror.

He's one sick little doll, Andy thought. Then he saw Chucky's eyes move to the right, scanning the *Playboy* magazine. Chucky's eyes

widened.

"My, my, how you've grown, Andy boy."

Andy put up a hand. His back was against the right wall. Only feet separated him from Chucky and his knife.

Andy remembered something, something important.

"You're not going to kill me. You need me. You need to transfer your soul into my body!"

But Chucky shook his head. "Wrong again, wimp. I got some fresh meat lined up, and I'm not gonna let you spoil it. Not this time."

Andy remembered something else.

You got a package, Barclay.

Whitehurst had said that.

Andy whispered the name. "Tyler."

Chucky grinned, a disgusting leer. "Yup. Just think . . . Chucky's going to be a bro! Bitchin'."

Now Chucky laughed, a weird cackle that was part witch, part demented electronic toy. Andy looked to his left.

He saw one of Shelton's shoes sitting on Whitehurst's chair. Andy reached out and grabbed it. Without taking any time to aim, he threw it at Chucky.

Hitting the doll right on the head, sending him flying backward. The knife tumbled to the floor, flying back and underneath the bed.

The door opened.

Andy looked at Chucky. He had quickly frozen into a doll.

Just a harmless doll.

Andy looked up at the door.

It was Shelton. He shook his head and walked into the room, over to Chucky.

"Damn!" Shelton reached down and picked up Chucky, so lifeless now. "Barclay, what's the matter? You homesick?" Shelton dangled the doll at him. "You miss your mommy or something?"

Andy shook his head. No, jerk, you're holding a killer, a monster.

But then Shelton looked down and saw his shoe.

"Hey, what's this—my shoe?" Shelton picked it up. Even sitting on the floor, Andy could see that tip of the shoe was badly scuffed.

"What the hell is this?" Shelton pointed the shoe at him.

Andy stood up. He felt the thin cut, the crease of blood at his ankle. He hoped Shelton didn't notice. Crazy Andy Barclay, they would say. Now he's cutting himself.

"It wasn't Whitehurst's fault. I—"

Andy looked at Chucky. No. There's no way I can tell him—the doll is alive, he wants to kill me. And all I had was your shoe.

Andy put his hands out, pleading. "I'm sorry about your shoe. It's my fault. It fell off the chair. I'll polish it. Just . . ."

Andy looked at Chucky.

"Just—please—give me the doll back."

Shelton sneered. "You gotta be kidding."

Andy shook his head. He licked his lips. "C'mon. It's a gift from my mother."

Shelton laughed, a cruel sound. He waved the doll at Andy. "Oh, Barclay. You're breaking my heart. You know that?"

He threw the shoe to Andy and it crashed into Andy's gut. Shelton laughed.

"Tell Whitehurst that he's off the hook. Tell the fat boy that I got myself a new slave."

Andy nodded, his eyes fixed on Chucky.

"Now clean up this mess. You have five demerits, plebe."

"But the doll?"

Shelton grinned. "Hey, my kid sister's birthday is coming up. I think she's gonna love it, don't you?" Shelton turned and walked out of the room, the doll dragging behind him.

Andy walked to the door and shut it.

He turned around.

It was over. Kyle and I ended it. But he's here now. *Chucky's back.*

Andy took a breath. There's no end to it. No end.

He looked at the mess of the room. The *Playboy* magazine, unnoticed by Shelton. The clothes scattered across the room.

Andy licked his lips. Got to think. Got to be prepared.

He thought: Got to find that knife. Then, then—I have to get to Tyler.

He bent down and felt under his bunk.

Andy touched the knife.

15

Whitehurst snored, a great rumbling noise that filled the room.

The rest of the dorm was silent.

Good, thought Andy, it's almost time.

He slipped out of his bed. The floor was cold, and he heard the wind rustling the leaves of the oak trees outside.

Andy reached down and opened his desk drawer. He removed the pocketknife. It felt small in his hands, just a boy's toy. But he told himself the blade is sharp. It's sharp enough to do what I have to do.

He walked to the door and turned the handle so slowly, not wanting it to squeak and wake Whitehurst. When it was turned all the way to the right, Andy pulled the door open and looked out.

The corridor was dark except for an Exit sign glowing at one end, near the stairwell. Andy took a breath and held it. He *waited.*

There's nobody out there, he thought. All quiet on the western front.

He stepped out into the hall, moving quickly down the corridor to the other end of the building. And as he walked, he opened the knife. The blade caught the scant light in the corridor.

He walked to the upper class barracks. The wind whistled outside, eager to get inside.

Andy moved quickly, afraid that someone would get up to go to the bathroom. Yeah, and see me stalking around with a knife in my hand.

That would do wonders for my reputation.

He passed the Exit sign and kept on going. He looked at the doors as he passed them. He saw one marked Captain Ellis.

He kept walking.

Then he saw a door with the words Major Shelton—Private. Andy stopped. He looked up and down the hall. Crazy Andy Barclay, wielding a knife outside Shelton's room.

Great, that's all I need.

Andy reached down and grabbed Shelton's doorknob. He turned it, but it stopped after only a quarter turn.

Locked. Damn, leave it to Shelton to keep his room locked.

Andy crouched down, close to the lock. He brought the knife up and started to jiggle the blade in between the lock and the door. He felt a bit of metal, and he jiggled the blade around some more.

Nothing happened.

Come on, he thought. Come on. Open up. He twisted the blade around a bit, and then he moved it sharply up and down. He heard something catch. Leaving the knife in place, Andy reached up for the doorknob and twisted it, slowly, still worried about making a noise.

The knob turned all the way.

Andy pushed on it.

Shelton's door opened.

It was black in Shelton's room. And it had a closed, stuffy smell. As soon as Andy had the door open, he heard the sound of Shelton sleeping, a low rumbling.

Good, thought Andy. He's asleep.

He stepped into the room. But he kept the door open a crack. I don't want the door shut, he thought. Not all the way.

He heard the wind at Shelton's windows, pushing against the glass, whistling through the quad. Another step, and Andy looked left, then right, scanning the room. He held the knife out in front of him.

Looking for Chucky.

I'll cut him to pieces, Andy thought. I'll slice that doll into so many small sections that it would take him an eternity to put himself back together.

Andy took a step. But he saw nothing. Just Shelton, curled up on his bed, a blackish shape.

He turned and saw the closet. He took a step closer to it, licking his lips. I'll have to be fast, he told himself. Get it open, get the knife up, fast, fast.

He grabbed the door to the closet, a larger piece of furniture than found in the regular dorm rooms. He pulled the door open, fast, hurrying. His right hand held the knife, tense, ready to jab.

The door flew open. Andy held it so it wouldn't bang against the closet.

There was something there, big with glowing eyes, looking right back at him.

Andy gasped, nearly stepped back. His hand squeezed the knife, ready to lunge forward.

The image in front of him mimicked his action.

Just a mirror, Andy thought. It's just a damn mirror, and it's only my reflection.

He opened up the other door, slowly, carefully. The knife still there, wavering in front of him, feeling so small.

With the door open, Andy saw Shelton's shirts and pants and

uniform jackets pressed close together, hanging in the closet. So close together. Something could easily be hidden behind them, he thought. He nodded, knowing what he had to do.

The wind whistled, shrieking at him. It was a cold night, and he heard the first spatters of rain against the windows.

Andy reached out and parted the clothes, pushing one pile one way, the other pile the other way. He looked info the gloom, searching for a spot of red or blue or orange.

Hidey-ho.

But there was nothing. He pushed the clothes a bit more. He heard something move, something from above.

From a shelf above the closet. Something moved and fell down on him.

A dark shape, round, spun toward him. Andy's first instinct was to back away from whatever was falling. That would be a good place to hide, he thought, real good. He could hide there and jump on me.

But—this shape caught the small amount of light, enough light so that Andy saw what it was.

A helmet, Shelton's combat helmet.

Andy reached out and caught it.

He held it a moment, breathing heavily. He turned to look at Shelton. There was no movement, just the steady rumbling noise of him sleeping.

And there's nothing in the closet, Andy thought.

Where are you, Chucky? Where the hell are you? Come out and play. Come out so I can cut your plastic body into a thousand pieces, a million pieces, until . . .

Andy started to turn.

When he saw something on the floor of the closet. Thrown there. Out of place in this very orderly universe of Shelton's. Andy crouched down and picked it up. It was a sheath for a knife. A big sheath . . . for a big knife.

It was empty. The knife wasn't in the sheath.

Andy's heart thudded in his brain.

He let the sheath slide to the floor. Andy turned to the bed, to Shelton. Wondering: Is that Shelton there? Is he alone? Or is there someone else with him?

Shelton's blanket hung over the side of the bed, hiding whatever might be under Shelton's bunk. Andy look a step closer to it. Another step.

The rain spatters grew heavier, until the rain made a steady

crackling sound against the glass. The wind whistled.

Andy stopped by Shelton's bunk.

He knelt down, slowly, the knife ever in front of him. He thought of the sheath, how big it was.

One hell of a knife in there, he thought.

He knelt by the bunk. He grabbed the blanket flap, and slowly, reluctantly—a sick feeling in his stomach—Andy raised it.

But, he thought, I'll have to bend down to see under the bed. And he remembered how fast Chucky was, how much like a real little kid he was, darting about, scurrying so fast.

Andy crouched down and looked under the bed.

His eyes peered into the blackness, the gloom. He waited, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness.

He saw nothing.

He nodded.

Where is he? Where the hell is Chucky? Andy let the blanket flap fall. He stood up. There was no place else to search, no where in the room for Chucky to . . .

Then he saw Chucky.

Andy's body went cold, an ice water tidal wave washing over him.

He saw the doll.

Now you don't see him . . . now you do.

Sitting on the bed, beside a sleeping Major Shelton. And Chucky had his knife, a giant bowie knife close to Shelton's neck.

Chucky grinned.

Andy's knife felt pathetic in his hands. He clenched his fist. Got to do something, he thought. Have to do . . .

"Uh-uh-uh," Chucky whispered, almost singing.

Then the doll mimed dragging the blade across Shelton's throat. Andy heard some thunder.

Then, still in a whispery voice Chucky sang. "My knife's bigger than yours."

Sick thing. He's sick. A million pieces. I'll make it so hard . . .

Shelton snored. Chucky's voice dropped the childish singing tone. "Now drop your knife, Andy, or I'll slice him open."

Andy hesitated. I know what he'll do if I drop the knife, he thought. That's easy to guess.

Chucky sneered at Andy, and then brought the cold metal of his blade closer to Shelton's throat. "Do it!"

Andy looked down at the blanket hanging over the side. He looked

around. The door was open, but the dorm was silent. It's just me and Chucky, he thought.

Andy lowered the knife blade, bringing it down to his side.

Chucky smiled, victorious.

Andy felt the tip of the knife touch the blanket, hooking it. Andy pressed it against the hem of the blanket.

He watched Chucky pull away his bowie knife.

I can guess what he'll do, thought Andy. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure that out. No sir.

The blade was stuck in the blanket edge.

Andy took a breath. Chucky started to move away from Shelton.

It's now or never, thought Andy. And he brought the knife up, dragging the blanket with it, flinging it over Chucky. The doll was entangled in the blanket. Then Andy jerked the whole bundle, pulling Chucky and the blanket off the bed.

Away from Shelton.

Who promptly woke up.

"What the fu—!"

Shelton shot up in bed. To see Andy kneeling beside him, holding a knife.

Doesn't look too good, Andy thought. But Shelton—obviously trained to repel night attacks by enemy saboteurs and Vietcong ninjas—quickly locked a hand around Andy's throat and propelled him against the wall.

Andy smashed into the stone wall, his head whiplashing—just a bit—to create a clear smacking noise.

Shelton rushed up to him, pinning Andy to the wall. He jabbed Andy in the gut just to make sure that Andy had no wind to explain himself.

And all the while Andy kept trying to watch the foot of the bed, where the blankets had been tossed, along with Chucky, and the knife.

"You picked one hell of a time to come out of the closet, Barclay."

Andy shook his head.

"No. Hey, I'm not . . ." Andy started to push away from the wall that Shelton seemed so intent in grinding into him.

Shelton pushed him right back.

"I didn't want to. I mean, I have to . . ." Andy looked at the dark pile by the bed.

He saw Chucky emerge from the twisted blanket.

"Stop!" Andy yelled. Again Shelton pushed him against the wall.

Shelton kept his hand locked on Andy's wrist. He gave it an expert twist, and Andy's knife tumbled to the floor. All Andy could do was watch Chucky hurry out of the room holding his bowie knife.

"You're in big trouble, Barclay. You picked the lock, broke into my goddamned room. *Big* trouble. What the hell are you doing in here?"

Chucky was gone. Shelton's hand admitted just enough air into Andy's windpipe so he could speak—barely.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Shelton nodded, thinking about what else he was going to do, Andy guessed. And I bet he has lots of nifty ideas.

Lots.

Then Shelton turned and looked around the room, his head snapping left and right.

Then back at Andy. "Hey, where's the doll, Barclay? Where's the damn doll?"

Andy opened his mouth. But he said nothing.

"You took the damn doll! That's it, isn't it? You broke in here—and took the *goddamned* doll."

Well, at least he has the description correct, thought Andy. If ever there was a damned doll, Chucky is it. Andy shook his head.

"You took the doll, didn't you?"

"No," Andy croaked, his windpipe all but constricted. "No, I—"

Then there was noise in the corridor. Shelton's bellowing had obviously alerted the rest of the dorm that something interesting was going on. Ellis came into Shelton's room and threw the light switch.

"Hey," Ellis said, "what's going on?"

Shelton glowered, still considering his course of action.

Other cadets came to the door. Shelton let his hand slip free of Andy. He stepped back.

"Somebody look the doll, Barclay." Shelton turned and looked at the cadets standing outside the room. The major raised his voice and Andy saw a sick grin on his face.

He has an idea. Major Moron has an idea.

And that can't be a good thing.

Colonel Cochrane shook his head. The rain was coming down in sheets, streaming over the hoods of the cadets' ponchos as they jogged around the field. Over their heads the cadets held their guns, which were growing heavier with each loop around the field.

The cadets looked cold, wet, and miserable.

Perhaps *too* miserable. Cochrane was inclined to give Shelton his head. After all, he thought, it's not every year that I have such a capable company leader, a real military man. Shelton will go far.

But this—well, it seemed a bit much.

Cochrane moved beside Shelton, just at the edge of the portico shielding them from the rain and wind.

"It's midnight, major. Is this really necessary?"

Shelton nodded and then turned to Cochrane. "Yes, sir. I'm sure you agree that it's important to weed out the thief. You yourself have said that we, at Kent, must subscribe to the strictest ethics, the highest degree of honor."

"Yes, Shelton, but it's damned miserable out."

Shelton nodded. "I'm trying to uphold the school's code of honor, sir." Shelton gestured at the soggy cadets of Bravo Company running through the grassy muck. "I'm trying to impress that upon the men."

There was a flash of lightning in the sky. Far away, an ominous yellow jag cut through the night sky.

It wouldn't do to have any of the cadets toasted by a bolt. Cochrane looked at his watch.

"All right, Shelton. Make your point. But I want everyone inside at oh one hundred hours."

Shelton saluted, crisp and military. A fine soldier. Maybe a bit too hyper, but very military.

"Yes, sir."

Cochrane turned and walked off the field, the wind at his back, the rain pelting him now that he was in the open.

Shelton snorted at the air.

Even old man Cochrane, with all his medals, still needed someone to put some steel in his spine. He sometimes treats the company like school kids.

That's a mistake I won't make, Shelton thought.

Shelton left the portico and walked out to Ellis who was leading the company in the midnight march.

"We have one hour. Let's make it count," Shelton said, smiling at Ellis. The rain streamed down his face, into his mouth. Sure was horrible out.

"Yes, sir." Ellis said, crisply saluting and grinning.

"By the time we're through, Barclay's going to be public enemy number one around here. Bravo Company will hate him."

Ellis nodded, and then turned to the sad looking group of cadets plowing through the mud.

Shelton watched as he barked out the orders.

“All right, ladies! Move it! Get those guns in the air! Get those knees up. Hup—hup.”

Shelton watched the company pick up the pace. He watched them splash in puddles. Getting wet, wetter.

Oh boy, thought Shelton. Are they ever going to hate Andy Barclay.

Andy watched Whitehurst losing steam. The fat kid was still holding his gun over his head—but barely. With each plodding step it wavered in the air. And Whitehurst’s jog had slowed even more. His feet dragged through the wet muck.

Then he heard Whitehurst say something.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Hang in there, Whitehurst. This can’t go on for much longer.”

Andy was watching Whitehurst, watching the kid dying out here in the rain. So he didn’t see another cadet run beside him. He also didn’t see the cadet stick a foot out in front of Andy.

“You’re history, asshole.” he said.

Andy turned, and then he felt his foot catch. He went flying down, his gun tumbling through the air. His face fell into a mud puddle and the gritty water splashed over him.

The other cadets behind Andy made a point to step on his hand or give him a little kick as they went streaming by. A few stepped in the puddle, splattering him even more with the muddy water.

They said things to him.

Jerk. Asshole. Dead meat.

Boy, I’ve assimilated nicely, Andy thought.

But Whitehurst had stopped. He extended a hand to Andy.

“Come on, Barclay, get up.” Most of the cadets had passed and Andy’s hands stung from being stepped on. Whitehurst grabbed a hand and yanked him up. “It would be a *lot* easier for everybody if you’d just give Shelton the doll.”

Andy stood up. He tasted the mud on his tips. “I don’t have the doll, Whitehurst.”

Whitehurst shook his head. “So what did it do? Get up and walk away?”

Andy had to smile at that. Hey, you guessed right. Now if only someone would believe me.

But then Ellis was there, screaming at them.

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing? Taking a coffee break? Get your asses in gear and move!”

Whitehurst just shrugged at Andy and then turned to chase the

cadets, now nearly halfway around the perimeter of the field.

Andy looked at Ellis. One of Shelton's flunkies. Like one of der Führer's henchmen. Following orders. Just happy to be one of the chosen leaders.

I don't like that, thought Andy. And I may have to do something about it. But not now. He reached down for his gun, and then started a slow jog following Whitehurst.

Thinking: Where's Chucky?

16

Why is it, Chucky wondered . . .

Why is it that just when I'm about to solve my Andy Barclay problems, someone always pops up to *save* the punk?

Why is that?

Maybe old Andy has some powerful *mojo* magic working for him.

Chucky walked down the corridor. This is where the little cadets, the tiniest toy soldiers sleep. He heard one cry out in the night, dreaming of home, of mommy.

Hey, this place isn't so bad.

I *had* my mommy. My crazy midget mommy with her booze and her strap, always screaming at me, pushing me around. Ranting at me about the big people, how she hated the big people.

Gee, Mom, you should see me now. You'd love it.

Chucky kept moving down the dark corridor. Good thing there was a room list posted out in the vestibule. Very handy, because it told me where everyone sleeps.

He shifted the knife to his other hand. It was big and heavy. More of a machete, really. He wondered how Andy was faring, explaining things to the thoughtful officers in his dorm.

Now, that was funny.

Poor Andy, always babbling about his doll.

Chucky counted off the rooms. One, two, three . . .

And four! This was it. He stopped and looked down the corridor. Nobody here but us ghosts.

Chucky pushed open the door.

He saw two bunks. Two bunks, two brats. Just have to pick the right rug rat. He moved close to one bunk. Chucky looked at the kid's blond hair.

Nope, that was Parker, Tyler's roommate.

Chucky squeezed his bowie knife.

He moved to the other bunk.

It's soul swapping time!

He saw Tyler buried under his blanket.

Chucky climbed onto the bunk and grabbed the blanket. Then he yanked it back, fast.

To reveal two pillows.

And a note sitting on the top pillow. Written by a kid with lousy penmanship, Chucky noted. He had to hold the note close to read it, it was so dark in here.

What the hell is this? thought Chucky.

He read the note.

DEAR CHARLES,

YOU'RE IT! COME AND FIND ME.

YOUR FRIEND, TYLER.

Chucky crumpled the note and tossed it to the floor.

"Damn," he said. He hopped off the bed. He looked around the room. There was no place to hide in here. Chucky nodded and left the room.

Chucky moved down the corridor. He passed other rooms, the doors closed. The kid wouldn't hide in there, he thought. Nah, he'd wake up other kids, get in trouble. No, he's somewhere else.

The doll saw doors at the end of the corridor. He's probably down there.

Cute kid. Hope he likes having plastic hands.

And Chucky had a neat thought. Yeah, wouldn't it be cool if we swap bodies—no, *when* we swap bodies—and then Andy comes along, old Andy boy to the rescue, and he sees Tyler. And I scream—'cause I'd be Tyler—I scream—"Help me! Andy! Chucky's going to get me." And before the kid has a chance to say squat, old Andy boy hops on him and cuts him to pieces.

Wouldn't that be great?

He kept walking down the corridor. When he heard a sound, a small voice singing from way back at the other end.

"Oh, Charles . . ."

Chucky spun around, but he saw nothing. He ran down the corridor, listening. But he heard nothing, saw nothing.

Hide-and-seek. It's too damn late to be playing hide-and-seek. The damn kid should know better. Now he's getting me real mad.

Then he saw him at the end of the hall, turning the corner, down to the other wing housing the administration building.

And Tyler sang out again, "Come and find me."

Chucky heard giggles.

"Damn it," he said. And Chucky ran, as fast as his little bandy legs could carry him.

He pulled the bowie knife out of his Good Guy overalls—with so many handy pockets. He held the knife tightly, thinking: Every game ends. And this one will too.

The sky was crisscrossed with a net of lightning, flashing briefly, lighting the soaking field with an eerie yellow glow.

The wind was icy, freezing Andy—who was soaked.

Then he felt it.

This isn't a normal storm, he thought. It was like this afternoon, when the clouds gathered. And years ago, in the factory when Chucky was stalking me, looking for me when I was a small boy.

Andy stopped running. He put a hand out and stopped Whitehurst.

"Whitehurst, where do the little kids sleep?"

"What?"

"The little cadets. Where do they sleep?"

Whitehurst pointed to a building lined with columns. "Over there. Why?"

There was another flash of lightning.

"Wish me luck."

And Andy jogged away, heading toward the building.

"Hey, Barclay," he heard Whitehurst call. "Where are you going?"

But Andy kept running. He reached the portico, and then ran beside the columns, protected from the rain. There was a great clap of thunder.

I know where Chucky is, he thought. I *know* what Chucky is doing.

He reached a door. Andy stopped and turned around. No one saw him. He pulled on the door handle. It opened, and there was Shelton, looking right at him.

Shelton punched him right in the stomach. A solid blow that knocked all the wind out of Andy.

Andy gasped. "You son of a bitch."

Then he straightened up, still holding his stomach.

He saw Shelton grin, shaking his head, as if he couldn't believe how stupid Andy was.

And that's when Andy brought his fist up and caught Shelton on the chin. The bones in Andy's injured hand hurt even more, but he saw Shelton stagger back from the blow. He rubbed his chin. But before Andy could get off another shot, Shelton grabbed Andy, throwing a tight headlock on him.

"You're gonna regret that, Barclay."

And holding Andy, Shelton marched him back to the field, away from the dorm.

Away from Chucky. Away from Tyler.

This is fun, thought Tyler. Playing hide-and-seek with Chucky, running around the dorm.

I knew he would come back, just *knew* it. He said he would. And now he's here. Boy, are Good Guy dolls great.

Tyler hurried down the corridor to the administration wing. It was dark down here. Too dark. The boy stopped and listened for the sounds of Chucky's footsteps. He listened.

And he heard the padding of the doll's steps on the floor. He's coming, thought Tyler. He's coming. Oh, boy, I have to hide.

He looked to his left.

And he saw Colonel Cochrane's office. He tried the doorknob. It was open, so he slid into the office. He saw the secretary's desk and the door to Cochrane's own office.

Pad, pad, pad. He heard Chucky coming down the hall.

Tyler giggled. This is fun. He ran inside Cochrane's office.

Tyler looked around. There had to be a place to hide in here. Somewhere.

He saw a closet. Tyler ran into the closet and shut the door behind him.

He covered his mouth, he wanted to giggle so much.

And he waited in the dark.

The little brat! Chucky thought.

What an obnoxious brat, running around like this, and now he's disappeared into someone's office. But at least it offers the hope of trapping the little bastard.

He hurried as fast as he could, down the hall to the office. Chucky stopped by the door and looked up at the sign.

Colonel Cochrane, the sign said.

Oooh, the big guy's office. The head muckamuck, the toy soldier who held me by my hair this afternoon.

I'll fix his wagon before I'm done.

Chucky stepped into the office. He kept moving slowly, the knife in front of him, past the secretary's desk, gliding to the open door of Cochrane's office.

Only one way in, Chucky saw. One way in, one way out. Great.

I just about have this situation wrapped up here.

Put all this doll garbage behind me.

He stepped slowly. He saw a glass case to his right filled with toy soldiers and medals. Nothing there, thought Chucky.

He looked left. No nooks and crannies to hide in.

Chucky heard the wind. Now where could the little brat be?

"Tyler!" Chucky sang the word. "Oh, Tyler . . . come out, come out, wherever you are!"

He stopped and waited.

"Olly-olly-oxen-free."

Still nothing. He is in here . . . isn't he?

He saw the closet.

Oh, yeah.

That's where he is.

He walked to the closet. And he said: "Get out here, you little . . ."

Tyler muffled his giggle. That Charles does like to curse. He's getting mad. Because I'm winning the game. I hid real well. Except . . .

It sounds like he's coming here, coming toward the closet.

Tyler squirmed inside the darkness. It was uncomfortable. Maybe it was time to come out.

Maybe Charles was *really* getting mad.

Whitehurst moved close to Andy. They were just marching now, plodding through the mud, their guns still over their heads.

"What's with you, Barclay?" Whitehurst sounded exhausted. And irritated, as if he was starting to join those who blamed Andy for the midnight romp. "What was that running away garbage all about?"

Andy kept watching Tyler's dorm.

"Forget it," Andy said.

Why am I watching the building? he thought. What do I expect to see? Chucky dangling Tyler outside a window? Lightning hitting the building?

I just hope the little kid is fast.

And Andy made a promise. Get through this night, Tyler. And I'll be there for you. Just get through this night.

"Come on, Barclay. Try me."

Andy looked at him. Try me, he says. Andy shook his head. Try me.

Okay. You asked for it.

He stopped Whitehurst, grabbing his arm. The rain didn't let up, pouring over his face.

“All right, Whitehurst, you wanted it. Here it is. The doll’s alive. He wants to take over Tyler’s body.”

Whitehurst looked at him. Then the fat kid kind of half grinned and turned away, nodding. “You’re right. Forget it.”

Andy let go of Whitehurst. The kid marched away. Well what did I expect? You tell someone something absolutely crazy and they act as if you’re crazy. That makes sense.

Whitehurst seemed to pick up his pace a bit, as if he wanted to put distance between Andy and him.

Funny. Maybe I just lost my only friend here.

And Andy looked at the dorm, coming close now.

He spoke loud enough for Whitehurst to hear.

“I just hope the kid can take care of himself.”

Tyler started to sit up, to push open the closet door when it started to creak open.

Kind of spooky. Creaky, like a haunted house door. Tyler sat there in the darkness.

He found me. Charles found me. I guess the game is over.

The door creaked all the way open.

It was Charles, looking inside the closet. He held something in his hand. Tyler couldn’t see what it was.

Chucky said something.

He said, “Gotcha.”

Ivers grabbed De Silva’s elbow.

Ivers, a girl that De Silva knew didn’t belong at Kent by *any* stretch of the imagination—maybe Bloomies, Neiman-Marcus, even Ikea. But *not* Kent Military School.

Ivers grabbed her, just outside Cochrane’s office. Uh-oh, thought De Silva, old Karen Ivers is losing her nerve. The cowardly clothes horse.

De Silva turned to Ivers, the light catching Ivers’s fire engine red lipstick.

The girl would wear makeup to her own funeral.

“I—I can’t believe that I let you talk me into this.”

De Silva shook her arm free. “Hey, quit your whining. And be quiet.” De Silva looked at Cochrane’s office. The door was open. Now, that was odd. It should be shut, even locked. She had brought a pick to open it.

But the door was open. Pretty strange.

She turned to Ivers. “Stay here and keep your eyes open. That’s all you got to do, Okay?”

Ivers nodded and rolled her eyes. “Oh, I just live for moments like this.”

De Silva laughed. Ivers’s sarcasm was a great antidote to the stiff upper lip of the Kent colonel. De Silva stepped into the room, aiming the flashlight in front of her. The outer office was empty. De Silva looked back at Ivers.

Who was putting on a fresh coat of lip gloss.

Never can tell who might come by. Girl could get lucky.

De Silva turned back to Cochrane’s office. She moved into the office. Slowly. She saw the glass case. Cochrane’s trophy vault, his desk, a closet. She saw the file cabinet. The office was nice and quiet. And Ivers is watching my back, she thought. Everything’s . . .

Then . . .

She thought she heard something. A movement. *Something.* She froze. Then the wind rattled the glass panes and De Silva nodded. That’s what it was. She moved to the file cabinet. She saw the top drawer, marked with the letters *A–G.* She licked her lips and grabbed the handle of the cabinet. She pressed the button, hoping that the drawer wasn’t locked.

She heard a click, and the drawer slid open.

She brought the flashlight up and aimed it at the files, flipping through them with her other hand.

De Silva found it quickly.

Andy Barclay. A sizeable folder, a lot larger than that of any of the other cadets. Good, she thought. I can find out what the story is with this new plebe, Barclay. There’s something intriguing about him—more than his dark eyes.

She pulled the folder out. And she heard Ivers hissing at her from outside. “I don’t know what you see in that guy, anyway.”

De Silva opened the folder. She saw his birth date, photos of a little kid, a cute kid, a newspaper clipping, yellow, about . . .

“He’s different,” De Silva said, “different from everyone else here.”

The clipping was about an accident in an apartment building. She flipped up the clipping. “And he’s pretty cute, too. He’s been in foster homes, it says here. No wonder he’s so quiet. I wonder.”

De Silva heard giggling.

“Ivers, was that you?”

“What?”

“Did you just laugh?”

“No, not me.”

De Silva heard the giggling again. She grabbed the flashlight and turned.

“Yeah,” Ivers said, “I heard that. What was that?”

De Silva aimed the light at the closet.

This was a new game, Tyler thought. He recognized De Silva’s voice. He was going to call out to her. That would have been fun.

But then Charles covered his mouth. A new game, Tyler figured. Guess we’re going to surprise De Silva.

But then it was quiet. Charles kept his mouth covered.

Tyler saw the glow from De Silva’s flashlight.

Though Tyler’s mouth was covered, he still laughed.

This was so funny.

17

De Silva turned to Ivers and put a finger on her lips. She gestured at the closet. Someone was in there—and this was going to be fun.

De Silva reached out and grabbed the handle of the closet. She whipped it open, spraying the inside with the glow from her flashlight.

“Ah-ha!” she said.

And there was Tyler, curled up inside the closet, giggling. He was holding a doll, a big mop of orange hair on its head.

“Tyler!” she said.

Tyler climbed out, pulling the doll behind him.

“So *you* took the doll. Shelton will have you court-martialed if he finds out.” Ivers came alongside of De Silva, looking at Tyler.

“What were you doing here, dwebe?” Ivers said.

“We were playing hide-and-seek.” Tyler looked at the doll. Like it’s a friend, thought De Silva. Pretty pathetic when a kid has to pretend that a doll is his friend.

“I was hiding and he found me.”

Ivers rolled her eyes at De Silva.

“What were you guys doing?” Tyler asked.

Ivers looked at the file in De Silva’s hand. “Er, we couldn’t sleep. I was just taking a little walk.”

Tyler nodded, and then Ivers walked up to him and took the doll.

“Oh, he’s soooo cute. I’ve seen these guys on TV.”

De Silva held the file lightly. There was more in there she wanted to see, more secrets about Andy Barclay. But now she looked at Tyler. He should get back to his room. They could all be in big trouble if they got caught out here.

She patted Tyler’s head. It felt smooth, reminding her of a bowling ball. “What’s his name,” De Silva said.

Tyler grinned. “Ask him yourself.”

“Oh, yeah,” De Silva said. She put the file down and went right up to the doll. “What’s your name, doll?”

For a second, nothing happened. Then the doll’s eyes blinked—and Ivers squealed. It was eerie in this dark office. The head moved, turning left and right, as if searching for someone to talk to.

"Hi! I'm Chucky, and I'm your friend to the end! Hidey-ho, ha-ha-ha!"

The voice, thought De Silva, is absolutely bizarre.

"Too weird," Ivers said.

"I love it!" De Silva said, taking the doll from Ivers.

Tyler came close, pulling on the doll's leg. But De Silva held on, fascinated by the way the doll could just come to life like that. Must have a pretty amazing computer chip inside it.

"His real name is Charles Lee Ray," Tyler said.

De Silva nodded, and took the doll over to a desk chair. "He's cute—but I think I can do a nice make-over for him."

"What? What are you going to do?" Tyler said.

"Give me your lipstick," De Silva asked Ivers.

"What are you? . . ."

De Silva didn't know why she wanted to do this. Maybe the doll is too weird; maybe it's too clever. She felt Tyler watching her, concerned. A thought crossed her mind. I'm scaring the kid.

But right then it didn't matter.

Ivers handed her the lipstick.

She took the doll's face in her hand. She screwed out the point of the lipstick. "This is going to look great," she said.

De Silva started outlining the doll's lips in red, and then she made a perfect bow shape with the red lipstick. Until the doll looked as if it was ready to be kissed.

"There," De Silva said handing the lipstick back to Ivers.

"He looks stupid," Tyler said. "You've made him look stupid. I thought you were nice."

De Silva stood up and gave Tyler a hug. She was laughing. For some reason, she liked seeing the doll like this, with his beet red lips.

"No, he doesn't, Ty. Your doll looks sweet." But she laughed even as she said the words to Tyler.

De Silva stood back, and Ivers collapsed into her laughing. "Makes me want to give him a big kiss," Ivers said. "He's . . ."

She stopped and spun around, looking to the outer office.

"Uh-oh! Someone's coming. I'm splitting!"

De Silva grabbed the Andy Barclay file and then grabbed Tyler's hand, hurrying him out of the office.

"Wait, you forgot . . ."

"We're dead meat if we're caught in here, Tyler. Come on!" She pushed him out into the hall and shut the door. She heard someone

coming up the steps, down the hall, whistling.

"Quickly, this way," she said, pulling Tyler along.

"But Chucky!" he said. "We left . . ."

But De Silva just dragged him along.

Chucky looked around the office. I can't believe it. *I. Can't. Believe. It.*

I had the kid. He was right here. I had the knife. It was nice and private and we were all set. Then those two fascist bimbos from hell open the door and I have to go back to being a goddamn *toy*. There's no justice!

But then to put lipstick on me. Just who do they think they're messing with? Do they know what Charles Lee Ray is capable of? Are they familiar with my repertoire?

Come to think of it, they probably aren't. My glamour days were over eight years ago. Charles Lee Ray is just another dead serial killer.

I've got no reputation.

Yet.

He stood up in the chair. He rubbed at his lips, grinding the sleeve of his Good Guy T-shirt on his lips, wiping away the red goo.

And when he was done, he opened his mouth.

And said:

"This means war!"

De Silva looked over her shoulder, hearing someone whistling a goofy tune that seemed to come from another world.

She saw Cochrane, dressed in sweats.

She looked forward, just as she reached the corner leading to the dorm wing. Tyler still tugged against her.

"Come on," De Silva hissed.

"But . . ."

And De Silva yanked him around the corner, toward the dorm.

Cochrane was whistling "Colonel Bogey March" from the movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai.*

Hell of a film, a real military film. No pussyfooting there. It was all about honor and duty and the responsibility of command.

The hot shower washed off the smell of rain and mud from outside. But still Cochrane couldn't sleep. It's been a crazy day, he thought.

Crazy. That poor, stupid garbage man. Imagine falling into your own truck. It was so horrible. A shame the cadets had to see it.

Supposedly they heard the poor bugger's screams.

And then the doll-stealing incident, and Major Shelton's . . .

Zeal. Yes, that's what it was . . . zeal. A very useful quality. You could never have too much zeal. When you're overwhelmed and outgunned, good old-fashioned American zeal can get you to hell and back.

Cochrane reached his office. And the door was open. He scratched his head. Did I leave it unlocked? he wondered. It wouldn't be the first time. Cochrane turned the doorknob and walked into the outer office.

He went to his secretary's desk. She had been working on the annual fund-raising report just today. And Cochrane wanted to look at the figures. Maybe play with them a little bit. We could use some breathing room here at the school. Times were tough, and the budget had no give.

"No give," Cochrane said aloud, rummaging through his secretary's desk. "Now, where the hell is . . ."

He stopped.

He heard a sound from inside his office. Mice? he wondered. We've had that problem before.

Cochrane stood up by his desk.

"Hello?" he said.

He listened again. No one answered. And there were no sounds.

Probably nothing, he thought. The building settling. The wind, the rain.

He walked toward the inner office. He looked inside, seeing his display cabinet—his treasures—all in order. He looked at his desk. And he saw a cannister of pencils lying on its side. And the cannister was rolling . . .

As if it had just been knocked over.

One pencil rolled to the edge of the desk, and then over the side to the floor.

Okay, he thought.

The air felt cold.

Cochrane, never one to shrink from battle, did have this thought: Maybe I should just back up out of here and close the door.

He watched the cannister, rocking back and forth slowly, until it came to a stop.

The wind whistled. A spook house shriek. Cochrane smiled at his own sudden fear. The wind blew it over. This damn old building, filled with cracks. The wind just cut right through it. There's another item for the budget! Storm windows.

He walked to his desk, to the pencil can.

The Colonel reached out and righted the can. He gathered the pencils and let them tumble noisily into the cannister.

But one rolled off. Cochrane walked around the desk, to where the pencil had rolled off. The wind shrieked at him.

He looked down.

And there was the doll.

Cochrane yelped. Entirely out of character. But damn, the doll scared him, sitting there, propped up against the desk. Cochrane furrowed his brow. How could the doll end up here? Is this Shelton's doll—the one he said was stolen? Or is this the doll I put in the garbage?

Or are they one and the same doll?

It's all very confusing.

And whichever is the case, how in god's name did it end up here?

And then he had this belated thought.

A disturbing, confusing thought.

Was it really the wind that knocked over the can of pencils?

Cochrane bent down and picked up the doll. He looked at it. Homely looking thing, he thought. All those freckles, a pug nose. And that *hair*. Like some kind of fright wig. Cochrane shook his head. Certainly wouldn't want a student to look like this.

He laughed. And said, "No way."

The doll had something on its lips, something red. God, it looks like someone had put lipstick on the doll. And that brought other fears to mind for Cochrane. Sometimes boys and girls get into peculiar things when they're away from home. You had to keep a close watch on them. They could act strange.

Lipstick on a doll.

Cochrane gave the toy a squeeze.

And suddenly the bright blue eyes blinked. The head swung around.

And it spoke.

"I like to be hugged!"

Cochrane nearly dropped the doll. But then it came to rest again. It must have done that because I squeezed it, he guessed. He laughed. A little laugh. Swallowed by the gloom of the dark office.

Well, if this is Shelton's, for his sister, I'd best get it back to him. Have him call off his torturing of Bravo Company.

Cochrane turned and started for the door out of the office. He slammed shut the drawer to his secretary's desk. I'll get the report tomorrow, Cochrane thought.

He moved out into the hall, closing the office door behind him, and starting to whistle again. Dragging the doll behind him. The doll was heavy. It would be quite a load for a little kid.

He dragged the doll—and then he felt movement. The doll's arm kind of *flexed.* He definitely felt movement there. And then the arm twisted, while the doll's other hand pushed against Cochrane's grasp.

It pushed hard, and finally the doll's hand popped free.

"What?" Cochrane said. Thinking: This is one amazing doll. This is some doll. It can really move, as if it's alive.

The doll sprung free and landed on the floor. Its tiny sneakers made a slapping noise on the stone floor.

Cochrane turned to the doll. God, he thought. What's it going to do now? Run away?

But when he turned, he saw that the doll stood there, looking at him. Really looking, and then he saw the knife.

"Wha . . ." Cochrane said.

The doll brought the knife up. Cochrane stepped backward.

No, he thought. This isn't real. The doll took a step. The doll smiled, and its tongue lolled out. A doll with a tongue!

Cochrane tried to breathe. All of a sudden the air felt hot and dense. He gasped at the air. Another step backward, another gasp.

The doll tilted its head, confused.

Cochrane shook his head back at it.

He gulped the air. Trying to breathe. He heard a thumping inside his head.

My medicine, he thought. My heart pills, I need my pills but they're, they're . . .

The doll slashed at the air. It grinned at him.

The thumping grew in his brain. Cochrane felt his hands and arms go numb; his legs felt like sticks. There were red and yellow and blue flashes in front of his eyes. Fireworks inside his skull. The same color as the clothes on this doll.

Cochrane felt the pain bloom in his chest. Like a stain, spreading from the left side, throughout his torso. He brought his hand up, as if it could stop the pain.

Stop the heart attack.

But that only signaled the end.

There was one last burst of color. A loud roar, the final crash inside his skull. His legs gave way as Cochrane choked, trying to suck in more air.

And he fell to the ground before the doll.

18

Chucky watched the colonel collapse before him.

"Aw, you gotta be kiddin' me." He walked close to Cochrane and poked him with the knife point. But Cochrane's eyes were wide open —fun-house eyes.

Except:

"This is no fun," he said.

Here I was going to have a nice party with the old general, and he dies in front of me. Dies of fright. Chucky grinned at that thought. Hey, I'm scarier than 'Nam. Oh, yeah. One look at me with a pigsticker, and John Wayne kicks the bucket.

Chucky walked around the dead body—just to make sure the idiot wasn't playing possum. Every few steps he jabbed Cochrane's body with his knife, trying to get it to stir.

Nope, he thought. All the fun is out of this one.

Yes siree.

He saw the pocket of Cochrane's sweatpants. Chucky dug his small hand in and felt a great loop of keys. That's cool, he thought. Now I have the run of the place.

Great.

And then, he was back at Cochrane's head. The mouth was open, a gummy pit that Chucky could smell. He didn't like that. It's not a good thing that I can smell it. Because if I can smell it, things are moving along.

This damn body could become mine forever.

No way, Jack.

Chucky gave Cochrane's cheek another poke. Out for the count, poor bastard.

He looked at Cochrane's eyes. Funny, how people look when they're dead. The big fish eyes, the pupils shrunk to tiny dots. They look as if they just saw their worst nightmare—and couldn't deal with it.

Or maybe that's how they look after I've dealt with them.

He chuckled at that.

And he remembered when he knew he had found his life's work.

It started with stealing—ripping-off wealthy idiots who had too much stuff and needed someone to help them share it. Income

redistribution.

His first partner was an old pro, a guy who knew everything about breaking and entering, a guy who had done two terms in the Illinois State Penitentiary. A real pro.

And, remembered Chucky, the only reason he liked working with me was that I would do anything. I'd walk up to someone's door in broad daylight. Ring the bell. Knock the whatever. And if someone opened the door, looking for the Electrolux man or Federal Express, they'd see me. If they opened the door a crack, I was in.

My partner liked it when people weren't home.

Me, I preferred it the other way.

One time I discovered what Damballa wanted from me. It was a simple concept—it just took time coming.

I could have Damballa's protection, his power. But there was a price.

Damballa needed something from these people. Some kind of energy generated by their fear, their pain.

I was Damballa's emissary. His apostle.

I'd get us inside the house, Chucky remembered. And after we had all the stuff out of the house—the silver, the cash, and any electronic garbage worth selling—the old pro left me alone.

With the person being robbed.

He didn't want her talking. Couldn't have that, now could we?

I'd do anything. And he knew it.

And that's when the woman's eyes would go bug wild, spinning around inside her head like a cartoon character dancing on a hot plate. She was gagged so there were no screams.

And that only made her terror worse.

It seemed so natural, Chucky remembered.

I'd spread out my gloved hands like a virtuoso about to play a masterpiece. My hands. That's all I'd need.

And I took forever to do it. Walking up to the woman; she rattled the chair, rocking it back and forth. Small, muffled grunts escaped from her gag.

What are you saying? I said. *What do you want?*

You want me to put my hands around your neck? Is that what you want?

Jeez, I don't know now. But if that's what you want. Well, okay. And that was so funny. Humor, always a trademark of mine. Leave them laughing.

The laughing dead.

And the feel of her neck—it was like discovering one's medium. Some people work with clay, some shape wood.

I work with necks.

It look a long time, the first one.

Charles Ray's partner eventually came inside, hissing at him. What the hell's taking so long? he'd asked.

Can't rush good work, Charles Ray thought.

He finished up. Making those spinning bug eyes go still. And then he turned and left.

Feeling very good.

The newspaper gave me a name, Chucky remembered. So many years ago. A name . . .

The Lakeshore Strangler.

So many years ago.

Chucky stepped away from Cochrane, away from the dead man. The night custodian will probably bop along soon and find the stiff.

And Chucky thought: The Lakeshore Strangler will live again. Oh, yes. Just as soon as Tyler grows up, eats his Wheaties. Only this time, I'll never get caught.

Experience is a great teacher.

Chucky tossed the keys in the air, caught them, and hurried away.

Andy pulled his jacket tight. He stood on the portico with most of the other cadets. The rain had stopped, and there was a pale light in the east.

It was dawn. Day two in Wonderland.

The wind chilled his naked scalp as he watched the paramedics wheel out the stretcher.

Cochrane was dead. Heart attack. And it seemed as if the entire school was out here to watch the colonel leave Kent for the last time.

The red bubble light on top of the ambulance flashed, rotating around. No rush here, thought Andy. Cochrane, rumor had it, was dead. DOA.

The stretcher appeared, and Andy saw that Cochrane's face was covered. Change that rumor to a fact, thought Andy.

And what about Tyler, Andy wondered? What happened to Tyler last night . . . and Chucky?

He saw some of the younger cadets on the other side of the ambulance. He spotted Tyler. The kid smiled at him and waved. Like he was at a parade. Andy laughed. He's only a little kid. He doesn't

understand the protocol of death.

But Andy nodded at him, still smiling. You're still here, huh, kid? Chucky didn't get you.

Unless . . .

Unless . . . It was a possibility. If Chucky had done the soul swap, that could be Chucky.

Waving at Andy, smiling at him. Andy started to push his way through the crowd to Tyler. I'll know, he thought.

I'll know if it's really Tyler.

Shelton shook his head. And then—as the stretcher passed—he saluted.

He took a breath. The paramedics unstrapped the body and—taking care to keep the face covered—they loaded it into the ambulance.

"The man was an animal, Ellis. He was strong as an ox. Damn, he lived through *two* wars."

Ellis nodded. "They say his ticker just gave out."

Shelton shook his head. Cochrane's body disappeared into the ambulance. "But why? Why now?" He turned to Ellis and looked right at him. "Why me?"

Ellis shrugged.

A paramedic slammed the ambulance door. It wouldn't be hurrying to the hospital. It wouldn't have to use its siren.

No rush here, thought Shelton.

And he thought: Cochrane's passing leaves a void—a leadership void. And somebody will have to fill that void.

Andy pushed closer, but there was a wall of cadets still cutting him off from Tyler, only feet away.

A policeman stood behind the ambulance, holding a clipboard. Andy felt the cadets pushing at his back and he turned. He saw Tyler.

"What are you doing up, fella?" the cop said.

Tyler blinked at him. Andy could hear the cop, hear Tyler's answer.

The ambulance started up.

"Huh," the policeman repeated. "Kinda young. You should be asleep."

Tyler smiled. "I—I was playing hide-and-seek."

The policeman shook his head. Andy heard Tyler, and he tried to push his way closer. The ambulance slowly pulled away from the front of the building.

“Who with?”

“With Charles,” Tyler said.

The policeman shook his head at the imagination of kids. The kid was playing an imaginary game with an imaginary friend.

Andy pushed closer. It’s no imaginary game, he thought. And Charles sure isn’t a friend.

Andy heard Tyler. “He’s my friend to the end.”

And then the policeman gently guided Tyler inside, tugging him away from Andy, from the crowd of cadets watching the ambulance cart away their fallen leader. Tyler disappeared.

And Andy thought.

He’s still Tyler. And there’s still time to save him. To save him and . . .

Stop Chucky.

19

A creature—part human, part gorilla—one of Kent's gourmet chefs, plopped a ladle of scrambled eggs on Andy's outstretched plate. The yellow glop landed on top of two sausages that looked to have the consistency, and probably the flavor, of sticks. At least the OJ looked wet and yellow.

The mess hall was packed with rows of rectangular tables, perfectly spaced with the oldest cadets in the front and the youngest in the back.

Andy exited the line and looked for a place to sit. He saw Whitehurst sitting at one table, but there was no room there.

Not that anyone was talking to Whitehurst. He sat alone, looking down at his tray.

Andy started moving, looking for some place to sit. I guess the cost of my friendship is too high. Whitehurst is already enough of an outcast without me hanging on his neck.

Andy looked for a spot, but all he saw were unfriendly faces, looking at him, remembering the previous night's jog.

Someone entered from the back of the giant mess hall. It was Botnick, racing down the aisle, looking at the cadets.

There were flags on each wall, odd flags—maybe from other military schools, famous battle groups. Andy didn't recognize any of them.

Botnick stopped right by Whitehurst.

Andy watched the barber flick at Whitehurst's hair.

Aw, cut him some slack, Andy thought. The mess hall is filled with cadets—a few with hair longer than Whitehurst's and you have to pounce on him?

Andy watched a second. Botnick rubbed Whitehurst's head and laughed—as if he were ordering Whitehurst to come by for a visit with Botnick's shears.

It's not so bad, thought Andy. You get to watch cartoons and hear Botnick laugh.

The barber kept moving through the mess hall. Andy heard him talk to another kid.

"Nelson, you need a trim too. I want to see you this P.M."

Nelson nodded.

Andy saw Tyler, sitting off with the younger kids. He was playing his Game Boy, lost to the beeps and buzzes. And there was a space next to him.

Andy walked over there.

He heard someone laugh, but he kept on walking.

When someone tripped him. Andy tried to get his balance, to catch himself, to stop his fall. But he tumbled forward, his tray out in front of him. He watched his plate of eggs and sausages go sliding off the end of the tray, tumbling . . .

Upside down.

And all the tables surrounding him broke out in laughter.

Andy's knees smacked into the floor hard. But he got up. He scraped the egg off the floor. Grabbed the two stick sausages. He mopped at the orange juice. A mess hall officer walked by.

"Kind of clumsy, plebe. Better watch where you go." The officer threw some napkins to the ground.

Andy nodded and wiped up the mess.

Surrounded by the giggles. Yes, Andy thought, I've certainly made a good impression here.

He picked up his tray and walked to Tyler's table.

Andy sat down next to Tyler but the kid didn't even notice him.

His face was all concentration, looking at his Game Boy, pushing the buttons.

"Tyler," Andy said.

The kid didn't respond.

"Tyler!"

"Hi, Barclay. Just wait a minute, just a second. I'm almost there, almost—oh, darn." Tyler looked up. "I blew the last screen."

Andy nodded. Tyler looked down at the mess on Andy's tray. "Hey, what happened?"

"Never mind, Tyler, I've got to talk to you about Chucky."

"You mean Charles?"

"Yeah. Whatever. There's stuff you don't know. Have you seen him?"

Tyler shook his head. "Not since last night."

Andy looked around, and he thought: Where are you . . . Charles? Where are you hiding in this place?

He could be anywhere, Andy thought. He's a little guy. He could be back in that kitchen, whipping up scrambled eggs.

Andy turned back to Tyler. "Look, he's hiding somewhere, Tyler.

He's going to lay low until he knows you're alone." Andy reached out and touched Tyler's arm. "And then he's going to come after you."

Tyler listened, his mouth open, trying to understand. But then he smiled, and shook his head.

"Yeah, he just wants to play."

Andy pounded the table. "No! Listen to me Tyler. No matter what he says, no matter what he tells you, no matter what he promises you, you've got to stay away from him. You understand? You've got to stay away from him. Don't let him fool you. He's bad."

But Tyler shook his head.

He picked up his game. Pressed a button. An annoying electronic song blared from the machine. "Charles isn't bad. He's a good guy. It says so on his shirt."

Andy reached out and grabbed Tyler's arm, making him turn. "No, Tyler. He lies. He's not a good guy. Believe me, he's bad news. He's hurt a lot of people. God, you've got to believe me."

But then Tyler's eyes narrowed. Some funny thought was going through his little kid's mind. And then he nodded, some great understanding finally achieved.

"Oh, I see. My dad—he says if you can't say anything nice about someone, don't say anything at all. I understand now," Tyler stood up. He stuck out his lip while he talked. "You're just *jealous,* yeah, 'cause Charles is *my* best friend now instead of yours."

Tyler picked up his tray.

"No, Tyler. I have to tell you . . ."

But Tyler stormed off with his tray.

Andy looked around, at the other little soldiers, playing with their eggs, trying to cut the rubber sausage.

Andy stood up.

Thinking: Where is he? Where is the damn doll?

Whitehurst trudged down to the Dungeon, the name the cadets gave Botnick's combination hair salon and torture parlor. He cuts hair the way most people mow their lawns, thought Whitehurst.

And my hair isn't even long. But Botnick was no different from the rest of the monkeys in this zoo. Everybody loves a fat kid.

Especially if they can make life miserable for him.

Botnick had just finished with another kid when Whitehurst walked into the shop.

"Oh, Whitehurst. Glad to see you fit an appointment into your busy calendar. C'mon, chubby, the chair's getting cold."

Whitehurst walked over to the barber chair. Botnick quickly covered him with a white sheet. The barber had a cigarette in his mouth, dripping ashes on the sheet.

What a slob, thought Whitehurst.

Botnick grabbed his electric razor off the counter. He clicked it on. A puff of smoke blew in Whitehurst's face and he coughed.

Botnick started running his trimmer over Whitehurst's scalp. He moved to the front, trimming Whitehurst's spiky tufts down to peach fuzz.

"You know, Whitehurst, you are the *sorriest* excuse for a soldier to ever disgrace these halls."

Whitehurst turned away. God, I'm trapped here with this abusive monkey on my case.

Botnick moved to the left side. "Face it. You're not cut out for this. Why don't you do yourself—and the school a favor—and leave Kent?"

An ash fell close to Whitehurst's face. More second-hand smoke wafted from Botnick. "If I had any choice in the matter, I would."

Botnick made his razor swoop close to Whitehurst's ear.

"Smart ass," he said. Then he shut off the razor. He pulled the sheet off Whitehurst.

"There you go, princess. You're bald."

Whitehurst looked in the mirror. That mirror reflected the back mirror, creating an infinity of images, an infinity of Whitehursts. All of them bald, all of them looking pissed off.

Botnick chuckled.

A real mental case, thought Whitehurst. He could be institutionalized—if he wasn't already in an institution.

Whitehurst started to leave.

"What—no tip?" And that brought a great har-de-har-har from Botnick.

A Cro-Magnon if there ever was one.

Botnick laughed again.

What, no tip?

Very funny. The fat kid didn't like the joke though. No sense of humor.

Botnick swept up the piles of hair—a good morning's load—and then bent down with a shovel and swept the clippings into a trash barrel.

All set for this afternoon's lot, he thought.

What? No tip?

Very funny.

Still laughing, Botnick walked over to his razor. He unplugged it and wrapped the cord around it tightly. He liked cutting hair in the afternoon better. The toons were on then. *Duck Tales. Tiny Toons.* Some wacky animals were always good for a laugh.

He carried the razor over to the cabinet, just to the side of the barber chairs. He opened the cabinet and started to put in the razor.

When he felt something.

"What?" He felt some more. His fingers closed on something. "What the . . ."

He pulled out whatever it was.

He pulled out a doll.

"Damn," he said. "How'd this get in there?" He looked at the doll. Hey, he thought, the synapse finally firing. I've seen this doll before. Yeah, on TV. It's one of them . . . one of them . . .

The actual name of the doll escaped him.

Then he remembered something else. These dolls can talk. Yeah, that's the big thing. They can talk.

Botnick looked at the door to his barber shop, checking that no one was coming in. Then he held the doll out at arm's length. He grinned, feeling just a bit stupid. Just a bit silly.

Then he said, "Hi."

And damned if the doll didn't come to life, twisting its head left and right.

And boy, all that head twisting reminded him of something. Kind of weird.

The doll clicked his eyes open and spoke. Just like the TV commercial said it would.

"Hi! I'm Chucky! And I'm your friend to the end! Hidey-ho, ha-ha-ha!"

Botnick laughed aloud. If this isn't the damnedest thing, a talking doll. Ugly sucker. Hidey-ho. What a wacky toy.

He laughed while he also studied the doll. It kind of looked like a demented kid. The head was real large, and the eyes were way too big.

But nothing was worse than that hair.

Way too long.

"Not regulation length," Botnick said, and he laughed again, doubled over at his own bountiful wit.

He shook, holding the doll. He was still holding the razor. He looked at the bright orange hair.

And Botnick had an idea.

20

Botnick laughed. Ugly little doll, all that orange hair. And that *outfit.*

The doll may talk, but he dresses for the birds.

Botnick held the electric razor. "That mop ain't regulation, Chucky. How long's it been since you had a trim?"

The doll turned its head again.

So weird, just like that kid in *The Exorcist.*

He blinked his eyes.

God, they almost look like they can see.

"Hey! Wanna play?"

Again Botnick laughed. What a killer. "Okay," he said. "You asked for it."

Still holding the doll, Botnick reached over and plugged the razor in. He flipped the switch with his thumb. This was going to be good. Yeah, seeing that stupid-looking doll with a real haircut.

Botnick started bringing the razor close to Chucky's head.

When the doll's arm moved, fast. I didn't know it could do that, Botnick thought. Didn't know it could move like that and . . .

He watched Chucky turn his head. The doll looked at the counter. And then a little doll hand grabbed something, a straight razor, sitting in a jar of sea blue liquid.

Chucky whipped the blade out.

"Wha—" Botnick moaned. "No. Hey."

The barber didn't think to let go of the doll. He still held the Good Guy out in front of him while the straight razor arced toward him.

Quickly. Professionally. The doll was someone who knew how to handle a razor.

It sliced through Botnick's throat.

At first, he didn't feel anything. Just a small pain, as if he had just gotten a paper cut at his collar line. But then he felt the liquid running down his neck. He opened his mouth to talk.

That was a mistake. Botnick felt the skin pull apart. He tasted blood in his mouth.

He heard the doll say something.

"A little off the top."

Botnick shook his head. More pain, more tearing. He hurt now. He

thought: I'm in big trouble. This doll isn't a good doll. And I'm in very big trouble.

Chucky grinned at him. "Oh, it's *definitely* you."

Botnick tried to moan. But instead all he heard was a gurgle. Coming from down there, down where the slit was.

He felt his knees melt. Finally, he dropped the doll. And Botnick crumpled to the floor. He saw blood spatters on the clean white linoleum floor. The doll stood there watching him. Botnick fell forward.

The electric razor flew from his hand. And he watched Chucky quickly scoop it up, still buzzing. He walked close to Botnick's head. Botnick saw the sneakers, covered with cute pictures of planes and space ships and tools.

He heard the doll talk to him.

"What you need is a whole new image."

Everything was red. The floor, the walls. Everything was covered with a red film. He heard the razor, but it sounded as if it was muffled by cotton.

He felt—barely—the razor on his head. Cutting his hair.

And the last thing Botnick heard—the very last thing—was Chucky cackling in his ear.

Damn, thought Whitehurst. Why did I have to forget my book bag in Botnick's dungeon?

He walked down the steps to the barber's shop.

It will just give him an excuse to dump on me some more. You don't belong here, Whitehurst. *You and Kent don't go together.* Tell me about it.

Whitehurst pushed open the door to Botnick's house of horror.

"Sergeant Botnick, I forgot my . . ."

The first thing Whitehurst heard was the whirr of the electric razor. And then, the sound of something gurgling, like a tap running slow.

His hand locked on the doorknob. As he looked down to the floor, he saw Botnick. The pool of red surrounding his head was still spreading.

And the doll, the Good Guy doll standing next to the head, cutting Botnick's hair.

And he heard laughing, as the doll trailed the razor up and down Botnick's head.

Whitehurst felt frozen. He tried to back up. Just back up and get out of here. Before, before . . .

The doll turned. His face looked like the face of a maniac. The doll's lips were pulled back from his teeth. And the plastic teeth looked gleaming and wet.

The doll nodded.

It was a threat. A promise. Like the way kids looked when they were about to beat Whitehurst up. Like—we're going to get you.

The doll opened its mouth. And he said, "Boo!"

Whitehurst bolted from the door, and ran up the steps, away from the barber, away from the blood.

Thinking: Barclay was right. God, Barclay was right.

Either that—or I'm losing my mind.

Whitehurst ran to the quad. He was late, everyone was supposed to be assembled by oh-one-hundred. Whitehurst puffed as he ran, gasping at the air. It was clear, almost cool. And he kept thinking about what he saw.

I have to tell someone, I have to get help.

Except he thought: Who'd believe me?

Barclay. But no one else. And then, what would they think?

What actually happened to Botnick? Who was the last person to see him? Whitehurst rubbed his chin. I have to speak to Barclay, he thought, and he ran harder.

He got to the quad and Sergeant Clark was addressing the full corps of cadets.

Damn, thought Whitehurst. I'm way late.

He saw his company, saw Barclay and De Silva. They were wearing blue sashes.

God, the garbage man got eaten by his truck. Colonel Cochrane had a heart attack. Bocnick's just had his throat cut, and they're still—*Still!*—planning on having the field games?

He heard Clark as he ran to position. He looked up and saw Shelton watching him.

"I know," Clark said. "and *you* know that Colonel Cochrane would never—under any circumstances—want us to deviate from our routine. That's the military way, and there was no one at Kent more military than Colonel Cochrane."

Whitehurst gasped at the air. Some cadets giggled at him.

I'm crazy, thought Whitehurst. What I saw—I didn't see. I'm losing my mind.

"Therefore," Clark said, "the war games will proceed as scheduled. Cadet Major Shelton will command the blue team."

Botnick, Whitehurst wanted to scream. He's *dead.* To hell with your

teams, your games. Botnick's . . .

"Cadet Captain Rawlings will head up the reds . . ."

Whitehurst looked up. He saw Clark waving two flags, one blue and one red.

"The objective is simple: to capture the other team's flag and bring it safely back to base."

Whitehurst saw Barclay and De Silva turn to him as he reached the front ranks of his company.

He looked at Barclay. I must look like a crazy person, Whitehurst thought. Will Barclay be able to see what happened to me in my eyes?

Clark shook his head, finally noticing Whitehurst's late arrival. He was holding up a .22 rifle.

"You'll pick up your weapons in the armory before moving out. You'll be using the standard-issue .22-caliber semiautomatic. And your ammo . . ."

Clark fired the gun at the wall of a building. The sound echoed through the quad.

Whitehurst took his place in line.

He saw a red splotch on the wall.

We're going to play paint-ball, thought Whitehurst. Just paint. But he watched the splotch drip down the side of the wall.

Barclay tapped Whitehurst's shoulder. "You okay?"

Whitehurst turned to him. I have to talk to Barclay, he thought. But —out of the corner of his eye—Whitehurst saw Shelton watching them. He turned back to Clark.

"If you get hit, you're dead. Hike back to base. Any questions?"

Clark waited.

Shelton still glowered at Whitehurst.

"Good. Company commanders, assemble your men. *And* women."

Shelton turned away, to face the company. The cadet major yelled, "Sound off."

And, starting at the far corner of the quad, the cadets began calling out their names, company by company.

Whitehurst felt something hit his arm. "Here," De Silva said.

Whitehurst, still puffy, still breathing hard, looked down at the blue arm band that De Silva just threw at him. He tried slipping it on, but it got stuck and started curling. De Silva giggled. She came close to him and pulled the arm band down, while pulling Whitehurst's arm through.

Then she looked at Whitehurst and ran a hand across his nearly bald scalp. "Looks like Botnick's in a bad mood today," she said.

Whitehurst turned to her, wanting to say: You don’t know the half of it. His mood couldn’t be worse.

But said to Barclay, who was watching him. “Barclay, listen . . .”

“What’s wrong?” De Silva said.

Whitehurst looked around. Other cadets were close by, watching, listening. They would hear. And everyone would think I’m crazy. Or worse.

Old Botnick’s dead. He was killed by a doll.

And Whitehurst is crazy.

Whitehurst looked around and shrugged. “Nothing. Nothing’s wrong. Nothing.” And he remembered what Barclay had said. About the doll, about Tyler. He looked across the quad.

He saw Tyler, slipping on a red arm band.

The arm band was bright, even from here. A big bright red arm band.

* * *

Oooh, fun and games at the old military school.

Well, thought Chucky, that’s just great. Just peachy, ’cause I *love* to play.

He was in the armory, the rows of guns and ammo behind him. The building was deserted. Everyone was out in the quad, listening to the rules of the game.

Chucky looked out the window at the two teams. There’s Tyler, and there’s Barclay. And—hey, look at that!—they’re on different teams. Is this fate or what?

Rules. They can be such annoying things.

Chucky slipped down from the window ledge.

Yes, he thought, I’m a big advocate of changing rules. Makes the game more interesting.

He turned back to the metal cage filled with weapons. He clambered over the fence—his sneakers fit the mesh perfectly—and then scooted down the other side.

“Now, let’s see what we have here . . .”

He saw a box of grenades. Better take one or two of those, he thought. Don’t want to run short.

He pocketed two grenades. Then he came to the rifles, arranged in two large sections. Some of the rifles had red markings and some had blue markings.

Chucky grabbed the top red rifle. He emptied the magazine and saw

paint bullets where live ammo would go. He tilted the gun and dumped out the red pellets.

"There we go," he said. Now he looked up. On a high shelf he saw smaller boxes labeled *.22 Ammunition.*

Chucky climbed up on one shelf, and he stretched up to the box. He brought the box down and started filling the magazine with live bullets.

He chuckled to himself.

"This ought to slow down that dork Barclay . . ."

He filled the gun.

Of course, he thought, it will still make a red stain. More of a permanent stain.

Now the game will be real interesting.

21

This gun is nearly as big as I am, Tyler thought.

Too bad it's only filled with paint. I'd like to fire a real gun, like Barclay, on the rifle range. That would be neat.

But then Tyler thought, as he followed his team marching through the woods, this *is* a real gun—even if it's loaded only with paint pellets.

As Tyler marched, he wondered: Where's Charles? Where's my new friend? Tyler smiled. I bet he'll come out here to the fields. I'll bet he'll watch the games. Charles likes to play games.

Like hide-and-seek. And what's that other game he wanted to play?

Swap the soul? Never played that one before. Bet it's fun.

Tyler looked over his shoulder at the other end of the field. He saw the blue team, Barclay's team, marching into the woods at another spot.

We have to get their flag, and they have to get our flag. I hope I get to shoot Barclay, he thought.

This is going to be fun.

There was one good thing about this nonsense, thought Andy. It gets me and Tyler away from the school. Maybe out here Chucky won't find us. He looked back to the school buildings. He saw the red team moving into the woods.

Maybe Chucky won't come out here.

I hope that's true. Because how can I help Tyler if he's on another team?

Playing paint-ball. God, is this dumb or what? thought Andy. Paint ball. We've gone from gung-ho to gung-dumb.

He looked over at Whitehurst. So quiet, marching by himself, struggling with his heavy pack, the gun. What happened to him? thought Andy. What happened to Whitehurst that he won't talk about it? What could make him go white as a sheet?

Let me guess.

Would it be, by any chance, maybe . . .

Chucky?

I have to talk to Whitehurst. Later, after he's calmed down. Talk to him, warn him, and maybe get him to help me.

The forest was ahead, thick with branches that reached into the trail as if trying to snag the cadets' backpacks.

It was uphill now. Andy grunted, humping his pack toward the blue team's outpost.

The blue team had a perfect location, on top of a hill, overlooking the whole valley.

Andy raised the binoculars and started searching the woods below, looking for splotches of red. He scanned the woods and finally saw some movement. A line of cadets, wearing red arm bands.

The enemy!

Nuke 'em. Drop the big one right on their heads. He moved the binoculars to follow the line of cadets, looking for Tyler. He didn't see him. Andy licked his lips, feeling cold standing here.

God, where is Tyler?

Finally he saw Tyler, up near the front of the line. The boy was hauling a gun that looked ridiculously big. Good boy, Andy thought. Stay near the front of the line. Just stay right there, where the rest of that wonderful, red team can keep their eyes on you.

He brought the binoculars down, and noticed Whitehurst, standing alone. Now's the time, thought Andy.

He walked over to Whitehurst. The fat kid didn't see him for second, but then he turned—acting startled. As if he wants to get away from me, thought Andy.

Whitehurst looked up, and—seeing Andy—started to move away. But Andy ran to him and grabbed his shoulder.

"Whitehurst, what's going on?"

He held Whitehurst tight. The kid tried to shrug off Andy's hand.

Whitehurst shook his head.

Wrong, thought Andy. Wrong. You're lying. Because you're afraid of what they'll say. Like what they've said about me and my mother and Kyle.

That we're crazy.

"You saw *something,* Whitehurst, didn't you? You saw him."

Whitehurst looked up. His face still had that same puffy-scared look that it had had when Whitehurst burst onto the quad late.

Andy stepped closer to let him know this was just between them. Andy wasn't going to announce it to the whole company. "You saw Chucky, didn't you?"

Whitehurst shook his head and licked his lips.

Andy let his hand fall, and Whitehurst started marching back to the

outpost. Andy ran alongside him.

“Hey, damn it, don’t wimp out on me now, Whitehurst. I need your help. That kid needs your help. If you saw Chucky, tell me. I need your help!”

Whitehurst turned and yelled at Andy. “I didn’t see anything, okay? I didn’t see anything at all!”

Right, Andy nodded. And that’s why you’re hysterical now, scared half to death.

Whitehurst turned and quickly walked away to the safety of the other cadets.

You saw him all right, thought Andy. You saw what Chucky can do, who he is. And that scared you. You don’t want him coming for you.

Can’t say that I blame you.

Not at all.

I didn’t want him coming after me either. But he’s not after me. And he’s not after Whitehurst.

He’s after Tyler. And—funny thing—Tyler thinks that the doll is his friend.

Friends to the end.

Which may be coming very soon.

Night came so much faster in the woods. One minute it was afternoon, and the tents were being pitched, while Shelton had two cadets cooking franks and beans. The next minute it was dark and everyone was gathered around the camp fire.

Andy sat off to the side. De Silva sat with her friends—Ivers and another girl, Williams. Ellis had a few younger cadets throwing heavy logs onto the fire. Shelton marched around the camp as if he were in the Ardennes the evening before the Battle of the Bulge.

Andy would have liked to go into his tent, to get some sleep. But even after carrying that pack five miles into the woods, somehow he didn’t feel like sleeping.

Guess I’m a bit preoccupied, he thought.

He moved closer to the camp fire. He saw De Silva glance up at him. She was telling a story to her friends.

Andy smiled at her good old-fashioned camp fire horror tale.

Andy stood and listened.

“The baby-sitter heard a thump thump thumping”—De Silva acted out something heavy, flopping—“like something being dragged across the upstairs floor. And then she thinks to herself . . .”

De Silva put a finger into the air, acting out the witless baby-sitter

to perfection.

Andy laughed, and De Silva looked up at him again.

“She thinks, I haven’t checked the children. So she hurries to the stairs, and up at the top”—De Silva lowered her voice—“she sees . . .”

Andy took a step closer, caught by her tale.

“She sees her boyfriend.” And now De Silva raised her voice. Her eyes went wide. “Completely dismembered . . . dragging himself along the floor with his chin . . .”

De Silva bobbed her head up and down, miming the horrid action.

“Thump . . . thump . . . thump.”

De Silva’s girlfriends were sitting very close.

Ivers spoke first. “That’s gross. Real gross. Like, it makes me want to throw up, De Silva.”

Andy felt the smile fade on his face. He stared into the fire.

He remembered the fireplace. His mother.

That was gross. Real gross.

And it wasn’t a story.

Chucky was going to kill them. Andy, an eight year old, *knew* that.

He remembered, even tonight, when that thought had hit home.

Chucky’s going to kill my mom. And then he’ll take my soul and kill me. And the only thing that could stop him was his mother.

Chucky on Andy’s leg. Andy saw blood. The doll was like a dog, biting, holding down. His mother kicked at it.

Andy screamed.

No. Mommy. No. Stop him. Stop Chucky.

She kicked the doll. He went flying across the floor. She kicked him again, and he went into the fireplace. And she screamed for Andy to come and help.

She held a screen in front of the fireplace and Chucky pushed against it. Andy was scared. He couldn’t move, couldn’t help his mother.

“Andy,” she screamed. “Please. Help me.”

Andy nodded. Then, slowly—a good boy—he did what his mommy asked. He went to one end of the fireplace screen. Chucky was cursing, yelling at them.

Andy held the screen, pushing it flush against the fireplace. He saw his mother reach behind her, trying to get the matches. While Chucky screamed at him.

“I’m going to get out, Andy. Yeah. And I’m gonna kill your bitch of

a mother, yeah, and then I'm going to get you, Andy boy!"

Andy remembered crying. The fireplace, the metal screen, went blurry, because he was crying.

His mother couldn't reach the matches. She stretched a bit more. Chucky was almost able to push the screen away. Andy put his whole weight against the screen. He heard Chucky growling like a dog, an animal.

His mother got the matches. She shook one out. Lit it. And then stuck it into the fireplace.

Chucky's clothes, his plastic skin, the newspaper in there, the log. It all went up so fast, cooking Chucky, melting him. Turning him into this black goo.

We thought it was over.

We thought it had all ended in that fireplace.

We were wrong.

Andy looked at the camp fire.

There was nothing funny in horror stories anymore.

De Silva spoke to him. "Hey, your turn, Barclay. You got a scary story?"

Andy shook his head. No. No scary stories.

"No."

"Oh, c'mon, Barclay."

Andy shook his head. "Sorry." He turned from the fire and started to walk away. "I'm going for a walk."

Doubt if I could sleep now, Andy thought.

No way.

As he walked into the darkness surrounding the camp, he heard Ivers start telling her story.

Chucky pushed at the bush.

My, my. Doesn't that look cozy. Those little cheerleader cadets sitting around the old camp fire swapping horror stories. Gross? They gotta be kidding. I could tell them *gross.*

How about some fillet of Botnick? Or the tale of the garbage man who really got into his work.

And there's Andy, standing near the fire, listening.

Maybe he hopes that he'll get lucky.

No, Chucky thought, seeing Andy's expression as he turned away.

No, getting lucky wasn't on Andy's agenda tonight.

Chucky crouched down, hiding more carefully behind the bush, watching Andy drift away from the others.

Uh-oh. He's going off on his own.

Now, isn't that con-*venient.*

He watched Andy walk into the darkness. Poor boy must have a death wish.

I know I do.

For him.

And I like to make my wishes come true.

Chucky crouched lower—and watched Andy walk away.

22

Andy walked farther up the slope, to a bluff that overlooked their campsite.

I could climb it, he thought, and see all around here. See where the other camp is—the red camp.

He started up the bluff, grabbing at a dead bush sticking out of the ground. Looking for a foothold. When he heard something behind him.

Andy froze, his hands locked on the bush. The dirt started to shift at his feet.

He turned, and saw De Silva.

"Hey, it was only a story," she said.

Andy smiled. He nodded. "That's not it. I'm just . . . getting away."

He look another step.

"Mind if I come along?" she said.

He stopped. "Oh, I'm sorry. Sure. Here."

Andy stuck out a hand and helped her climb to the first outcrop of rocks. She fell into him, and they both pressed against the bluff.

Andy looked to the top of the bluff. "It's a bit of a climb. Probably not much for you."

De Silva smiled and then nodded in a mock expression of macho.

"Yeah. Probably." She laughed. And so did Andy. Boy, he thought, do I like her. He turned back to the bluff and started climbing.

After a few feet the dirt shifted, and he lost some ground. De Silva quickly shot out a hand and, putting it on his butt, stopped him from sliding any further.

"Thanks," he said. Beet red. Thankfully it was too dark for De Silva to see.

As he reached the top, he heard sound. Music, strange music. Weird music. All thumping and squeaks. He hurried now, grabbing at the lip of the bluff.

"Hear that?" he said. "There's music or something. Do you hear it?"

He pulled himself up to the top of the bluff, and De Silva quickly followed.

"Yeah. Wow, it sounds like a calliope. But where?"

Andy stood up. From here, overlooking the woods, he could see a

lake—and an amusement park. “It’s a calliope,” he said. “See.”

De Silva stood close to him. “There’s a carousel. A roller coaster. Neat.”

Andy just looked and listened, absorbing the wonderful sounds, the music, and then, when the rollercoaster plunged, the screaming.

“Pretty cool, huh?” De Silva said.

Andy nodded. Yeah, cool . . . but it was a place for families, kids with their moms and dads. “I went once. A long time ago.”

Andy wanted to look away. “I almost forgot there were places like that, where people go to have fun.”

De Silva was close to him. Andy was aware of her standing right next to him. “It reminds me of this place my dad used to take me. I always wanted to go on the merry-go-round. He always wanted me to test my strength with those mallets.”

Andy nodded.

And then he heard a rustling.

Just behind them.

“Listen,” Andy grabbed De Silva’s arm. “There’s somebody there.”

De Silva cocked her head. Left and then right. She shrugged. “It’s just a chipmunk—or something.”

Andy let go of her arm. There was just the sound of the calliope now. And then the screams of the kids on the roller coaster, the roar of the wheels on the metal track.

De Silva looked at him. “Pretty jumpy tonight?”

Andy took a breath. Yeah, he thought. It must seem that way. He looked at De Silva, so pretty, even wearing her field uniform. “Nothing scares you, does it?”

She grinned. “Oh, I don’t know about that. I have fears—like everyone. Just that Shelton isn’t one of them.”

Andy looked down to the woods. He couldn’t see any other camp fire except their own. The red team—and Tyler—could be anywhere.

“De Silva, where do you think the red team camped out?”

“Who knows? Shelton will find them, though. He always does. He may be a jerk, but he’s great at these stupid games. He’ll find them. Why are you so curious?”

Truth or dare time, thought Andy. I told Whitehurst about Chucky. And boy, that worked out well. The guy won’t even talk to me now. And he’s acting as if he saw Chucky in action.

He turned to De Silva.

Thinking: I need a friend. I could use some help. Someone who’s strong and good and doesn’t get scared.

"De Silva—er—can I trust you?"

She smiled, as if the question itself was absurd. "Yes! What is it? What's wrong?"

He opened his mouth and took a deep breath. "Er . . ." Then he sighed. How to start? Where to start? Just come out and tell her? There's a doll here. He wants Tyler's soul . . . and he wants to kill me.

To go back.

To the start. To the wonderful Christmas present my mom got me. And how it cost her twenty bucks, and our life together.

De Silva waited.

"De Silva . . ."

She smiled warmly, trying to make this easy. "By the way, you can call me Kristin. That's my first name. Though I sure don't hear it much around Kent. You got one too, I assume?"

Andy was still thinking. Looking for a way to tell her. "Got one?" he said absently. "Got what?"

She laughed. "A first name, *Barclay.*"

He nodded. "Andy."

"Andy it is then. Now what were you trying to tell me."

Isn't that sweet.

Young love is about to bloom.

Chucky shook his head. Perhaps, he thought, I can just come behind them and—poof—give them both a neat push off the edge of the cliff.

Oh, it would be such a terrible accident.

Chucky looked at his plastic hands, scuffed from crawling up the bluff. He looked at them, still plastic. They haven't turned to flesh yet. That's good. He flexed the fingers. But they're starting to feel more real, more like my own fingers.

He turned back to the cliff. Yeah, they looked close enough.

Chucky took a step from behind the pine tree.

Andy grinned.

There was no way, no good way to tell her. Forget the whole idea, he thought.

"Hmmm?" De Silva said, coming closer. Andy felt her touching him, felt her body pressing against him. The way it did the other day on the rifle range.

She leaned closer. No longer really looking for Andy to say something. She leaned forward, until her lips brushed Andy's cheek,

and then moved to his lips.

She pressed against him.

It felt wonderful to have De Silva squeezing him, moving her wonderful lips against his while the calliope rang out “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.”

Om-pa-pa! Om-pa-pa!

Andy reached around and pulled her tighter.

When he heard the footsteps, he broke the kiss. Andy turned to the direction the steps came from, aware that they were at the cliff edge.

He turned. And saw Shelton.

“Well, don’t you two look cozy. The dwebe plebe and Lady Tarzan. Break it up. It’s lights out in five minutes. And we’re moving out at dawn.”

Andy reluctantly let go of De Silva, and walked past Shelton.

He saw the cadet major’s smirk as he filed past him, down to the path leading down the bluff.

Great, Andy thought. Something else for Shelton to be on my case about. And I was close, he thought. Close to telling her what’s going on, why I need her help.

Just like I needed Kyle inside that factory.

He waited for De Silva to catch up, and then—together—they climbed down the slope while Shelton watched them.

When Andy got back to the camp, Ellis was on patrol, marching back and forth as if he were guarding Fort Knox.

Andy walked past him to the tents.

As he passed Shelton’s tent, he saw something lying on his sleeping bag.

Andy looked back at Ellis, but he was walking in the other direction, his paint gun at the ready.

Andy knelt down as if he were tying his shoelaces.

He looked in the tent.

It was a map.

Andy remembered. Just after dinner, Shelton had gathered three of the senior cadets, and they disappeared together.

Andy had an idea.

Still crouching, he moved into Shelton’s tent. The lantern cast a pale yellow glow on the sleeping bag. It was a map of the woods. Andy saw the lake, the amusement park, a circle indicating the blue team.

And there, to the north. Another circle. In red. The red team.

Shelton was coming, following him down the bluff.

Andy grabbed the map and slipped out of the tent.

He looked at Ellis. Just about to turn around. Andy ran to his own tent.

Whitehurst was already in his sleeping bag, staring up at the top of the tent.

Andy got in quickly, and then closed the flap. But then he crouched down and—pulling the flap open just a bit—peeked out.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

Andy grabbed his pack and pulled it on.

“What’s going on?” Whitehurst said.

Andy looked at Whitehurst. He’s still scared, Andy thought. He won’t talk about it, but the kid’s still scared.

Andy tightened the straps of his pack. “I’m going after Tyler.”

Whitehurst sat up. “What? Are you crazy? You’re going after Tyler. You’ll never find him.”

Andy shook his head. “Wanna bet.”

He pulled out the map from his back pocket.

“What’s that?”

“Shelton sent out a reconnaissance squad, three guys, just after dinner. And it looks like they found the base of the red team.” Andy showed Whitehurst the big red circle on the map.

“How’d you get that?”

“I swiped it.”

“Shelton will be real—”

“I don’t give a damn about Shelton.” Andy crawled close to Whitehurst, his head bumping the top of the tent. “Now listen, Harold Aubrey. I need help. Tyler’s in trouble. You know he’s in trouble.”

Whitehurst shook his head.

“Listen! He’s a sitting duck out there. Now, are you with me or not?”

Whitehurst looked away. Staring at nothing. Then, slowly, he let himself fall back to his sleeping bag.

Andy waited. He won’t look at me, Andy thought. Can’t look at me.

“You know, after sixteen years of people telling you you’re a wimp, you start to believe it yourself.” Whitehurst shook his head. He sounded as if he were going to cry. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

Andy nodded. He patted Whitehurst’s leg.

Then he turned around. He opened up the tent flap again. He saw Ellis, facing this way, but just about to turn around.

And I don’t see anyone else, Andy thought.

He waited. Ellis completed his turn. Just at that moment Andy threw the tent flap open wide and crawled out.

He got to his feet. And then—map in hand—he ran north.

23

Andy darted from his tent, running with his heavy pack before Ellis made his turn. The dark maw of the woods was just there—only feet away.

Ready to gobble me up, thought Andy.

He heard Ellis's voice. Andy's breath choked in his throat and he thought, Ellis caught me.

Where are you going, Barclay? What are you up to?

And he'll look and find the map I stole.

But Andy didn't turn back. Maybe Ellis had been talking to someone else. Maybe he didn't care.

Andy reached the woods and vanished down the meandering trail that led to the slope and turned north.

To the red camp.

A branch scratched Andy's face, and he jumped back. It was black here. When Andy looked straight up he saw nothing, no stars, no moon—if it was out. Absolutely nothing. He jiggled the pack on his back. It seemed so heavy.

He dug his flashlight out of the side of the flap and pulled the map from his pocket.

He aimed the flashlight at a nearby tree. There was a dab of yellow paint on the tree. Looking back at the map, he saw the trail marked with a yellow line.

Leading right to the red outpost.

At least I'm going the right way, he thought. He took another step. But Andy didn't see the twisted root sticking out across the trail. It snagged his foot, and he went flying down. His pack made him land even harder.

Andy got up to his knees. He smelled the dirt, the rich smell of the pine trees, the air growing cold and damp.

Got to get a move on.

Yeah, thought Andy. Before Chucky gets to Tyler.

He got up quickly and started hiking north.

Chucky risked pushing the pack's top flap open just a little. Slowly, he thought. Very slowly.

Don't want Andy boy to know he's carrying a little surprise in his

backpack.

This is great, Chucky thought. Andy is so worried about Tyler, worried that I might get to him. And he's the one carrying me right to Tyler's camp. I was never a Boy Scout. No way I'd ever find the red camp! But Andy is doing it for me.

Chucky saw the back of Andy's neck. He watched him push branches away.

One snapped back, scraping Chucky's cheek.

Ow, that hurt.

Move your tail, Andy boy. Time's a wasting. My biological clock is ticking.

Chucky slipped back down into the pack, warm and comfortable . . . riding to the red camp.

Whitehurst heard voices. He had been asleep, sound asleep, but now there were voices right outside his tent. He heard Ellis's voice, and then Shelton's. And the cadets.

Whitehurst pulled his sleeping bag up, over his face. Hope they quiet down, Whitehurst thought. Let me get back to sleep.

Someone opened his tent flap and a bright flashlight was aimed right at him, even shining through the sleeping bag.

"Let's go—up and at 'em, ladies."

Whitehurst reluctantly pulled down the bag. Ellis had his light aimed right at him.

"Wha—what is it?"

"C'mon, Whitehurst, get up. We're moving out."

Whitehurst looked at Barclay's sleeping bag, flat, like a deflated inner tube.

Whitehurst rubbed his eyes. "But I thought we weren't going till dawn."

Ellis shook his head. "Somebody stole a reconnaissance map out of Shelton's tent, Whitehurst. You wouldn't know anything about that, now would you?"

Whitehurst shook his head. And then he saw Ellis flash his light on Barclay's sleeping bag.

"Hey? What's going on here? Where's Barclay?"

Whitehurst turned to the bag, as if he had just noticed it was empty. He opened his mouth, about to say something.

Exactly *what* he didn't know.

Ellis turned and shouted outside.

“Major! Sir! I think you better have a look in here, sir!”

Damn you Barclay. Now you’ve gotten me in even more deep shit. What a great roommate.

Shelton stood beside Ellis, bending down and peering into the tent.

“Yes. What is it?”

Ellis made his flashlight move up and down Barclay’s empty sleeping bag. “Barclay’s gone AWOL, sir.”

“What?” Shelton moved into the tent. He looked at the sleeping bag and—oh, lucky day—he looked at Whitehurst.

His face looked extremely unhappy.

Shelton smacked his fist into his palm. “I knew it. That bastard, that traitor took the map. He’s doubling for the reds! Can you believe it?”

Whitehurst was about to answer that, no, I *can’t* believe it. But Shelton hurried on. Just a rhetorical question, thought Whitehurst.

Shelton grinned. The glow from his flashlight made his face look demonic. He grinned at Ellis, then at Whitehurst. “Where is he, fat boy?”

Whitehurst cleared his throat. “I—er, I don’t know sir. I don’t . . .”

Shelton shook his head, still grinning. “No matter. If Barclay is doubling for the red team, have we got a surprise for them.”

Shelton shot another weird look at Whitehurst.

He’s crazy, thought Whitehurst. Shelton thinks he’s Patton—no, Napoleon. He doesn’t understand that this is just a stupid school, that we’re just kids. *AWOL. Traitors.*

God, Shelton is nuts.

Still grinning, Shelton said, “Be ready to move out in five minutes.”

Whitehurst watched Ellis return the salute sharply, obviously caught up in the wartime mentality of Shelton. “Yes, sir.”

Shelton left and Ellis turned back to Whitehurst. “Hey, you heard the man. Get off your ass and get moving.” Then Ellis left, and Whitehurst weighed the chances that he could sink back down into his bag and everyone would forget about him. But he shook his head and stood up, feeling cold and tired and—he admitted—a little worried about Barclay.

I should tell Barclay I saw the doll.

Whitehurst pulled on his pants. I will, he told himself. Next time I see Barclay. I’ll tell him. Tell him that I saw the doll. I saw it killing Botnick. And, and . . .

I’ll help Barclay. I’ll help him with whatever he has to do.

Whitehurst pulled on a Kent sweatshirt, wondering where the hell Andy Barclay was.

The yellow trail crossed a stream and—in the dark—Andy had to step on stones barely visible in the water. They were covered with a slippery moss.

He took one step, and his foot slipped into the shallow stream. His boot and sock were immediately soaked.

He pulled his foot out and stepped onto the next stone.

There was still no sign of the red camp.

Andy got to the other side of the stream. He stopped again, and checked the map. He aimed his light at the map, following the yellow trail. Yes, the trail came to a stream, and then a small hill.

And there, he saw the big red circle.

He shrugged his shoulders, trying to settle his heavy pack.

With his light picking up the yellow mark on a nearby tree, he started closing in on the red camp.

Just at the top of the hill, Andy came to the red camp.

There were two young cadets on guard duty, but they seemed more interested in talking to each other. They won't be a problem, thought Andy.

No, the real problem will be finding out which tent Tyler is in.

He waited.

Damn, I can't go checking every tent. Hello, is Tyler in here? I'm from the blue team.

What do they do to spies in kiddie military school?

Shoot them at dawn with paint pellets?

Andy waited.

He saw a little kid come out of a small tent off to the side. The cadet trotted off to the cover of some bushes. Nature calls.

It calls little kids quite frequently, Andy thought. So I could wait here for Tyler to pop out. All evening.

Andy rubbed his chin. Then he had an idea. He look off his blue arm band and scooted over to where the kid was peeing.

"Hey, you," Andy said.

He caught the kid in midstream.

"Yeah?"

Andy smiled. "Oh, just checking. I heard a noise."

There, Andy thought. I hope I sound like a proper authority figure.

"Thought someone might be sneaking up on us," Andy said.

The kid nodded. He wiped his nose. Charming.

"Better get back to your tent," Andy said.

He looked over at the red guards, standing near the camp fire,

completely unprepared for an attack.

The kid turned and started to leave.

“Oh, I wanted to check up on Tyler. Which tent is he in?”

“Number three,” the kid said. Then he pointed helpfully.

Andy nodded.

Loose lips sink ships, he thought. The red team better shore up its security.

Andy waited until the kid went back into his tent, before he started creeping behind the tents, out of sight, making his way closer to Tyler.

24

A shadow made by the camp fire crept slowly across Tyler's sleeping body. The boy stirred.

Andy inched closer to Tyler's ear. "Tyler," he whispered.

Tyler's eyes stayed shut. "Tyler!" Andy said. He turned to see that Tyler's roommate, Parker, was still asleep. Then looked back at Tyler. "Wake up."

The boy's eyelids, heavy with sleep, slipped open. Tyler wiped at his eyes. And then he saw Andy. He didn't react for a moment, but then Tyler looked to his left, to his gun. He reached for it.

Andy beat him to it, grabbing the gun and pulling it back. Aiming it at Tyler.

It was loaded only with paint pellets, but the game was probably very real to Tyler.

"Uh-uh, soldier. I've got you covered." Tyler stopped moving. "Now, don't make me shoot you."

Tyler put his hands up. "I'm cool."

Andy nodded. He waved the rifle at Tyler. "Get dressed. You're coming with me."

The kid gulped. "You mean, I'm a prisoner?"

"Get moving," Andy said.

Whitehurst grabbed at a bush to help himself up the slope. This is crazy, insane, searching for Barclay like this, he thought. It's pitch-black. But Shelton seemed to be digging it, Whitehurst saw. The guy was made for war. Whitehurst saw Shelton raise his hand.

Ellis stopped behind his commanding officer. "Company halt," Ellis said. De Silva, Ivers, and the others stopped.

Shelton looked down at a map.

"Let's fan out," he said. "Barclay might not have taken the yellow trail. De Silva, take the left flank."

De Silva rolled her eyes.

Shelton tossed her a walkie-talkie. "Check in every few minutes. If you see—or hear—anything, call in. Emerson, you go right."

Shelton turned to Whitehurst. He sneered. "Whitehurst, stay up with us! You're slowing us down."

Whitehurst nodded. Thinking: what an idiot.

Shelton nodded, the commander in chief. “Everybody, let’s move out.”

The blue team was on the march again.

Every few seconds Tyler turned around to check that Andy had the rifle trained on him.

Poor kid’s worried, thought Andy. If he gets covered with paint, red or blue, he’s out of the game. A fatal wound is a fatal wound. And Tyler, video game nut that he is, doesn’t want to miss any of the fun.

Only this isn’t part of the game. This isn’t fun.

“Where are you taking me?” Tyler said.

Andy gestured with the gun, pointing to an opening in the tangle of bushes and trees. He decided not to take the yellow trail back. Someone might be looking for me, Andy thought. Or maybe I’ll bump into the Chuck man himself.

In the dark.

With his big pigsticker.

So Andy followed a makeshift path beside the trail while making his way slowly through the brush.

“C’mon,” Tyler repeated. “I’m a prisoner of war. You *have* to tell me where you are taking me.”

Andy laughed. “Anywhere, sprout. Back to school, back to my camp. Anywhere. You just can’t be left alone.”

Tyler shook his head. “I don’t get your strategy.”

“I’ll explain it to you later. After all this is over.”

Tyler stopped. The gun barrel hit Tyler’s back.

“What’s up?” Andy asked.

“I have to take a leak.”

“Right. Okay. Me too, now that you mention it. Go find a spot. But don’t get out of my sight.”

Tyler moved to his right, disappearing into the gloom.

Andy could see his dark shape blending with the trees, the scrubby brushes. If I blink, he’ll disappear, Andy thought.

He slipped the pack off his back. It landed with a thud. Then Andy moved to the left, still keeping his eye locked on the shape of Tyler, somewhere in the darkness.

Andy unzipped.

He pissed, and he looked down—just to make sure that he wasn’t standing down slope—for only a second.

He turned back to check on Tyler.

But he was gone.

Tyler finished, pulled up his fly, and took a step. Then he saw Chucky, standing there, hiding behind a tree.

Tyler smiled. What a neat surprise! Charles came to find me. He saw Charles put a finger up to his lips, telling him to be quiet.

Tyler took another step closer to him, a step away from Andy.

This is great, thought Tyler.

He heard Andy coming behind him. Charles slid behind a tree again.

Tyler hid behind another tree. Thinking: This is real great.

* * *

Andy held the gun up. "Tyler? Tyler? Where are you?"

Andy started walking to the right, where Tyler should have been.

How could he have disappeared so *fast?* Andy thought. It's not possible.

"Boo!" Tyler popped out from behind the tree.

Andy's heart did a flip-flop. He leveled the gun at the kid.

"Let's go, Tyler. Enough fooling around. That's it."

Andy walked Tyler over to his pack.

And he saw that the top flap was open.

He bent down to the pack. Andy thought: I *know* I tied the flap securely. I know I tied it tight, and . . .

He looked up.

Tyler was gone again.

"Tyler . . . Tyler!" Andy looked around, but he saw no reassuring black shape, no dark figure darting about. He saw nothing.

"Oh, god, no," Andy whispered. "Don't let him get away. Not out here. Please."

"Tyler, come back. Tyler, the game's over. Ty—"

Andy looked back at the pack. The open flap. The pack had felt so heavy.

Andy felt his stomach go tight. He felt sick, as if he had to throw up.

Oh, god. He knew why the pack had been so heavy.

"Hey, kid, watch the branches," Chucky ordered.

Chucky had his little doll legs wrapped around the kid's neck, riding him. And if I want to go left, he thought, I give him a little squeeze left, and if I want to go right, just squeeze right.

"That was a close one, Charles. Thanks for rescuing me."

Chucky laughed. "What are friends for? Now we can play swap the soul."

But Chucky felt the kid shake his head. "No, I'm tired of playing. I just want to go back to bed. We can play tomorrow. When I wake up."

Wrong-o, kid. Chucky felt the boy's small neck with his hands. If I didn't need his body, he thought. I could do wonders with the boy's trachea.

Instead, he leaned close and said, right in Tyler's ear, "You're a goddamn drag, you know that?"

Tyler looked around at Chucky, a hurt expression on his face. Uh-oh. I hurt the brat's feelings. Got to be careful.

"Charles, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing, kid, I just thought—"

Tyler tripped and Chucky felt himself flying forward, over the boy.

Chucky landed with a thud. He patted the pocket where he kept the knife. It was gone. He got to his knees and looked around.

Tyler came running over to him. "Hey, I'm sorry. You okay, Charles, you . . ."

Chucky kept looking around, until he saw the knife. He grabbed it and quickly tried to hide it behind his back.

Not quickly enough.

"Hey. What's the knife for?"

Chucky made his doll eyes go wide. "Knife? What knife?"

Tyler pointed to the arm Chucky held behind his back. "You're hiding it behind your back."

Chucky blinked his eyes, hoping he looked properly stupefied. Then he slowly brought his hand in front. "Ohhhh. You mean *this* knife."

He looked at Tyler, whose face looked confused, hesitant. Can't have that, now can we?

Chucky took a step closer to him.

"Charles?"

The kid was nervous. As if I give a damn.

Chucky sneered. The Good Guy smile was gone. No more smiling at this brat.

He snarled at the boy. "Stop calling me that! My name's Chucky. You got that? *Chucky* . . . and it's show time, twerp."

Tyler backed up. Chucky liked seeing that the little kid so scared. Kind of nice, after waiting so long. Don't want to rush the sensation.

Tyler shook his head. The dawn of understanding.

Wake up and smell the coffee, kiddo.

"B-Barclay was right. You're *not* a Good Guy."

Chucky nodded. Yes, this is definitely enjoyable. Heightening someone's consciousness.

"Sorry, kid. You got me." Chucky pointed the knife at Tyler. "I'm *bad.*"

As in: not good.

"And now we will play swap the soul."

But Tyler shook his head and kicked at the ground. A spray of dirt and stones went flying up into the air, into Chucky's face, his mouth. He spit out the grit and blinked his eyes. But his eyes didn't clear the way real eyes would. He felt the specks of dirt, scratching his glass eyes. He felt it—and it hurt.

"You little . . ."

But Chucky saw Tyler running away fast—too fast.

"Get back here," Chucky screamed. But the kid was running as if his life depended on it.

Which was exactly the case.

No, Tyler thought. I can't let him get me. He'll do something bad to me.

He ran through the woods, jumping over stones, dodging the branches.

I can't look back. Because that's when he'll get me, that's when he'll be there. If I look back . . .

The branches scratched his face, and he felt roots rising from the ground, trying to snag his sneakers.

He didn't know where he was running to.

He heard sounds, rustling in front of him, to the side. He kept pumping, running full out.

Got to get away, thought Tyler. Have to get to Barclay, tell him I believe him now. And tell him I want to help him stop Chucky.

What a terrible, horrible name. *Chucky.*

It sounds like a type of hamburger. A Chucky.

A Chucky burger.

Tyler guessed what Chucky wanted the knife for. He wanted to turn me into a Chucky burger. But what's that game he keeps talking about, swap the soul?

What was that?

Tyler heard a weird noise. Something was sitting in a tall tree as he

ran past. It hooted at him.

Then Tyler thought he heard something behind him. Tyler broke his rule. He turned and looked behind him.

And just then he tripped on a rock.

“Oomph,” he said. The wind was knocked out of him. He got to his knees fast.

He heard him. Calling to him.

“Tyler . . . oh. Tyler . . . I’m going to find you. And you’re getting me *mad.* And you don’t want me . . .”

Tyler scurried to his feet. He looked around and saw some big boulders, piled on top of each other, making something that looked like a rocky fortress.

That will slow him down, Tyler thought. He ran to the boulders.

* * *

I had him.

Yeah, Chucky thought, the kid was just in front of me. And then he disappeared. It’s so damn dark out here. Why the hell don’t they install some lights? Can’t see a damn—

Chucky stopped, thinking that he might hear something. About the only thing he could see was the knife blade, glowing.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

There was no answer.

Kid isn’t that stupid. I had him for a while, though. Chucky turned. He saw the boulders.

He sang out, “Olly-olly-oxen free!”

He walked to the boulders.

25

Tyler climbed on top of one boulder, and then hid behind another.

Did he see me? Thought Tyler. Did he see me climb up? Is he going to come behind me, jump on me—and stick that knife in me?

What's he going to do?

Tyler pressed his cheek against the cold stone. He hugged it close, hoping that its shadow would protect him. Tyler felt his nose running. He rubbed at it, then he froze—hearing the slurpy sound he made.

He didn't even sniff.

Then he felt something wet on his cheek. A tear, then another, rolling down.

No, he thought, I can't cry. Dad wouldn't want me to cry. He'd want me to be brave. Be a good little soldier, he always said.

I wish you were here, Dad.

I wish you were here to protect me.

He heard Chucky yelling.

"Where are you?" Chucky yelled.

Chucky waited. Go on, he thought, standing by the pile of boulders. Make just one little noise, one little gurgle. And this time I promise you won't get away. Come on.

"Where are you, you little shit?"

He waited. And thought that the kid must have gone the other way, back toward the red camp. Damn.

It's not going to be easy to get to him now.

But I'll do it. He turned away from the boulders and started moving back to the trail.

Andy ran, and every few leaps, he would stop and yell. "Tyler!"

When there was no answer, he kept on running. I've really screwed up now, he thought. I got the kid out here, with Chucky, with no one else around.

Great work, Barclay.

"Tyler!"

This time, just before he was going to start running again, he heard something. A rustling. He listened. Branches and leaves were moving.

"Tyler?"

He waited. The wind blew. That's it. Just the wind.

"Ty—"

Then a dozen flashlights clicked on, and he was blinded by the lights.

Andy brought his hand up to shield his eyes. He saw shadowy figures. He was surrounded by cadets, holding rifles. He heard a voice he recognized.

Good old Shelton.

"Shelton?" Andy said. As soon as the word was out, the shadowy figure rushed him and pushed him to the ground.

The angle of the lights changed, and Andy could see Shelton standing over him, a very disagreeable look on his face.

"You goddamn traitor! Give me the damn map." Shelton reached down, patted Andy's pockets, and pulled the map out.

Jerk. Moron. Traitor. What does he think this is, the Revolutionary War? He probably wants to hang me.

Andy started to get up.

Again, Shelton pushed him down with his foot.

"You know what we do to traitors, Barclay? Do you have any clue?"

Andy heard some threatening giggles from the other members of the blue team.

Andy tried to sit up again. "Forget the map, Shelton! And let me go!"

Shelton gave him another kick.

This is getting to be a problem, thought Andy. I may have to do something about this.

"Screw you," Shelton said. "You're dead meat, soldier."

I'm not a soldier. I'm sixteen, and this is my worst nightmare.

Andy sat up again. "Listen to me. Now listen! Tyler's in trouble."

Andy looked at the shadowy crowd of cadets. He couldn't see any of their faces. But he made out a rounded, eggplant-shaped body. "C'mon, Whitehurst, back me up. Tell Shelton what you saw."

Andy waited.

He saw Whitehurst shake his head.

Shelton turned to his right. Andy watched Ellis come trotting up. "Call in the flanks, captain."

"Yes, sir."

Andy heard Ellis bark into his walkie-talkie. "De Silva, Emerson, do you copy?"

Andy had an idea. De Silva could help. If I can convince her, she would help.

He waited for De Silva to answer.

De Silva heard Emerson's voice on her walkie-talkie. She shifted her gun to one hand and reached down for the two-way radio.

"De Silva! Do you copy?"

She brought the walkie-talkie up to her mouth, and started to press on the button.

She heard a creaking from above. De Silva looked up—to see something falling on her.

She took a step, but there wasn't enough time to get away from the doll—the doll!—as it fell on her. She saw something gleaming in the doll's hand.

The doll crashed onto her back, knocking her to the ground. Her gun flew away. The walkie-talkie jumped out of her hand, the Talk button still unpushed.

The doll climbed on top of her legs and held on. De Silva started kicking and clawing at the ground.

She heard the walkie-talkie squawking at her.

"De Silva. Come in! De Silva, do you copy?"

De Silva dug at the dirt and tried to kick this thing away. But it was locked on her legs, holding her tight.

Then she felt the doll crawling up her back, his tiny hands and feet first digging into her spine, then closer, right up to her neck, and . . .

She felt the blade. Pressing right against the side of her neck. De Silva froze.

The doll leaned close. This isn't happening, she thought. This is like one of those goofy horror stones we tell around the camp fire. This isn't . . .

But the doll leaned close to her and brought his lips right next to her ear. She felt a wet spray from his little doll mouth.

Impossible!

And she smelled something, as if he hadn't brushed his teeth and the last thing he ate was really rank.

He whispered to her.

A tone that scared her.

"We have to stop meeting like this."

The knife point danced on her skin.

Two cadets walked beside Andy—his guards. Shelton marched the blue team through the forest, returning to camp with his prize. A genuine traitor.

Caught by a genuine asshole.

I have to make a run for it, Andy thought. What are they going to do to me, shoot me with paint bullets?

He heard Ellis, just behind him, talking to Shelton.

“Emerson’s on his way back, sir. But we didn’t hear anything from De Silva.”

“Her walkie-talkie’s probably on the fritz. Keep trying.”

“Yes, sir.”

Andy shook his head.

No, Andy thought. It’s not her walkie-talkie. It’s something else. And wouldn’t it be damn ironic if Chucky took out the toughest cadet at Kent? Andy looked around for a spot to make a run for it.

When he heard a voice. A kid’s voice, squealing, yelling at them.

“Help! He’s coming for me! Help!”

It was Tyler, cutting through the brush as fast as his legs could carry him.

He saw Andy and headed straight for him, but Shelton cut him off, hooking the kid by his shirt collar.

“Well, what do you know. Looks like we got ourselves another POW.”

Andy turned to the kid. “Tyler, are you okay?” He looked up at Shelton. “Let him go, Shelton.”

“Be quiet, Barclay, before—”

“You were right, Barclay! Charles *is* bad! He tried to hurt me! I think he wanted to kill me. He kept wanting to play swap the soul.”

I know that game, thought Andy.

Andy pulled away from his guards and went to Tyler.

“Where did you see him? Where was Chucky?”

The kid’s cheeks glistened with his tears.

“I—I—”

Shelton came closer. “Who the hell is this Charles? Is he on the red team?”

“Where was he, Tyler? Did you see De Silva?”

The kid shook his head.

Ellis stood next to Shelton. And his walkie-talkie came to life.

Andy heard that weird voice, made more strange by the walkie-talkie.

"Come in, Barclay. You there, Andy boy? Come in . . . this is the Chuck man coming right at you."

Shelton looked at Andy, a bit of confusion beginning to play on his unflappable stiff upper lip. "Who's that?" he asked.

Tyler answered. "It's Charles. That's *him.* He tried to kill me."

Shelton mouthed the word to Andy. *Charles?*

The major grabbed the walkie-talkie from Ellis. "Who's this?"

Ellis pointed at the walkie-talkie. "Er, you have to push the button, sir."

"Oh." Shelton nodded. He pressed the button and repeated his question. "Who's this?"

Shelton waited. Ellis tapped his arm. "You have to release, sir."

"Put Barclay on, jar head."

Shelton shook the walkie-talkie, angry.

Ellis came closer. "It's the reds, sir. They're up to something. Some kind of disinformation. It's just a trick."

Shelton nodded and spoke into the walkie-talkie again.

"What is it you want?"

The voice, high-pitched and scratchy over the cheap radio, sounded hysterical, out of control.

Time is running out, thought Andy. Chucky can't take forever.

"I want the kid. You know, the *kid,* the brat you got right there. The little bro, dig? Bring him up to Split Rock. Do it, or there'll be hell to pay."

Shelton grinned, smirking, all his self-confidence back. "The reds," he announced smugly to his blue team. "They want Tyler back."

Now Shelton brought the walkie-talkie up to his mouth with a dramatic flourish. Shelton probably thinks history will record his comments. Like that general who said nuts to the Nazis in the Ardennes.

"Go screw yourself," Shelton said.

The blue team cheered.

The radio was quiet for a few seconds. Everyone waited. Was that it? Were negotiations over?

"It's not the red team," Andy said.

"Shut up, traitor."

Then the walkie-talkie came to life. The voice sounded a bit more subdued, controlled.

Not a good thing.

When Chucky gets serious, someone usually dies.

"Don't waste my time, leatherneck. I've got a real short fuse . . . real short. But hey, don't take my word for it."

Shelton looked at Andy. The major was confused again. What's he doing? Shelton's expression seemed to ask.

Andy wasn't worried. Because Tyler was here. Tyler was safe.

But then—

There was another voice. Someone gasping, as if struggling. Andy felt his bowels go tight.

He heard De Silva.

"Andy! Don't do it! Get Tyler away. Don't—"

De Silva. He turned to Shelton.

He saw Whitehurst, coming closer. The fat cadet liked De Silva. Maybe he even loved her. How could you not love her?

"And-yyy!"

Chucky was back. "Hear that, Barclay. I'm waiting. At Split Rock, dude. Split Rock."

Then the walkie-talkie went dead.

26

Chucky looked over at De Silva.

Not bad looking for a cadet.

But she didn't look back at him. No, she only had eyes for the grenade in Chucky's hand. He dangled it at her, showing his doll thumb resting on the release button.

All I gotta do is let go, and ka-blooie!

No more De Silva.

He brought the walkie-talkie up to his mouth. Now, this is fun, he thought. This I'm enjoying. I'll get that little kid delivered right to this rock.

It was De Silva who told him that this place was called Split Rock. Easy to see why, with this giant tree growing right through the rock, as if the tree had hatched from a stone egg.

Chucky spoke. "Now bring the kid here," he said, "or I'll waste her."

He brought the walkie-talkie down, cutting communications. He saw De Silva edge away, as if she were looking to run around the back of the rock.

Chucky held up the grenade and shook his head.

"Come back a bit. Don't want you getting lost in the woods, babe."

De Silva walked back.

"Good." Chucky smiled. Then he brought the walkie-talkie up and started playing with the dial.

The next phase of my plan, he thought. Oh, boy. Is this ever going to be great.

"Red team," he said. He waited, but heard nothing. Chucky tried another setting. "Red team, come in, red team."

This is your Chuck *meister,* checking in with you.

Still nothing, and Chucky tried a third setting.

"Red team, come in. It's urgent. Red team."

There was a reassuring squawk, and then a scratchy voice. Bingo, thought Chucky.

"This is red team. Over."

Chucky kept De Silva in sight, as he tried to lower his voice. I don't want it sounding too weird.

"We got a situation up here at Split Rock. Blue team sighted. Advise

you to move your troops in."

Chucky took his finger off the button. Oops, almost took my finger off the wrong button—walkie-talkie in one hand, hand grenade in the other. It's so easy to get confused.

"Now, wait a minute. Who is this?"

Chucky shut off the walkie-talkie.

He started walking toward De Silva.

A real cute cadet, no mistake about it. He laughed. "Now, we just sit back and watch the sparks fly."

And he kept laughing, his mechanical laugh echoing off the giant split boulder, echoing through the trees.

He thought: I bet she thinks I'm crazy. I bet she thinks that I'm insane. Well, well, I might be. Who wouldn't be, trapped in a doll's body. *Temporarily* trapped, he reminded himself.

And while De Silva cringed, hugging the stone, he laughed even harder.

Andy saw Shelton giving out arcane hand signals to the blue team, pointing his hand straight up in the air, waving it around.

Shelton had ordered Andy released, because he had told the truth about the hostage situation.

There was only one problem. Shelton still thought it was only a game.

He crouched close to the ground, and called for Andy and Tyler. He had black smudges on his face.

God, thought Andy, the guy's ready to face the Vietcong. Too bad he doesn't know that what he's really up against is something a lot worse.

"There's Split Rock," Shelton whispered.

Andy looked in the darkness and saw the black hulk of a large outcrop of stone. A tree sprouted from its center.

Shelton jabbed Andy and Tyler in the solar plexus. "You two go ahead. The rest of us will circle around. We'll move in on your signal."

Andy shook his head. Shelton still thinks that he's playing war games.

"No, Shelton, this is no game. I'm telling you, this guy is dangerous."

Shelton laughed. "Chill out, Barclay. It's only paint."

Shelton turned to the blue team, spread out around the rock. "Wait for Barclay and Tyler," he said.

Then he turned to Andy. "You want to save De Silva?"

Andy nodded.

“Then let’s do it.”

Andy looked at Tyler.

“You all set?”

Tyler, though still scared by his encounter with Chucky, nodded. “Sure, Barclay. Let’s get De Silva.”

Andy stood up and started moving toward the rock.

When they were a few steps away from Shelton and the others, Tyler said, “I’m scared, Barclay.”

Andy put a hand on the kid’s shoulder. He thought: I know what it’s like to be a little kid—and scared. I know.

He patted Tyler’s shoulder and said, “Me, too, Tyler.” The wind rustled the leaves. “Me too.”

The rock, just a dark shape, grew in size, blotting out stars. He was only feet away before he saw the giant oak tree running right through the middle of the rock.

He didn’t see Chucky . . . or De Silva.

“I don’t see them,” Tyler said.

“It’s okay, Tyler. He’s here. Just . . .”

Then, from the base of the boulder, he saw a small figure get up, then—yes, it was De Silva. He saw her eyes, wide, terrified.

Even De Silva looked scared.

“Hey, thanks for the escort, Barclay. Now drop the kid and just walk away.”

Andy hoped Shelton was coming closer, following his plan. It was still a game to the cadet major. But—game or not—they might still be able to capture Chucky.

“No,” Andy said.

Chucky walked further away from the boulder. He dragged De Silva behind him. He held up something. It looked like a stone, a baseball, a . . .

Hand grenade.

Crazy little bastard.

“I think, Barclay, that you better do what the old Chuck man says. Now, move it!”

Tyler looked up at Andy. Andy’s hand was still on his shoulder.

Chucky’s voice rang out. “Over here, kid.”

“Andy?” Tyler said.

Andy nodded.

Tyler look a step toward Chucky. Walking toward the black rock.

Andy waited. Tyler was nearly to Chucky.

Come on, Shelton, thought Andy, where the hell are you?

Andy heard Shelton yell. “De Silva, duck!” He turned around and saw Shelton coming toward them. He looked back at De Silva, catching her ducking, exposing a very confused Chucky.

Shelton finally saw Chucky, the doll standing there, holding a live grenade.

Andy wanted to turn around and say, *he’s holding a grenade, you idiot! A live grenade. He could blow us all up.*

But Shelton, stopped in the woods, said, “What the . . .”

Chucky looked left and right. Andy saw De Silva starting to slip away in the confusion.

The guns fired. A giant blue splotch exploded on Chucky. He looked down and sneered.

“Tyler,” Andy whimpered. “Come back, Tyler.”

But the kid wasn’t moving. He was petrified by the sounds of the guns, by the darkness, by Chucky.

De Silva was moving further away.

Another blue splotch bloomed on the rock above Chucky. But then there were other gun noises. Coming from the far side of the rock.

We didn’t have anyone over there, thought Andy. None of *our* guys are over there.

He turned to look at Shelton. The cadet major was cocking his ear, curious, confused.

The gunshots sounded closer.

Andy heard pinging noises, the sounds of ricochet.

Shelton’s mouth flapped open.

When something slammed into his chest.

A giant red spot grew there. Shelton’s eyes were big cow eyes. Looking down at the red spot, touching it, bringing his fingers up to his lips.

“Damn,” Shelton moaned, and he collapsed to the ground.

“No!” Andy screamed. He ran ahead, to Tyler. Yelling. “No . . . Tyler!”

Andy heard Whitehurst screaming at him. “Barclay. Oh my god. Barclay, they’re firing live ammo!”

A bullet went pinging into a tree next to Andy, and he fell to the ground. “Tyler!” he yelled again. But the kid was frozen. Wood chips flew into the air, chewed off the tree by the bullets.

The red team may win this game, Andy thought.

He looked up. He saw Chucky, looking at him, a foul sneer on his face. He still held the hand grenade.

That's all we need, Andy thought. Chucky lobbing a grenade.

Then he saw a bullet hit Chucky's arm. It ripped into the doll's arm, tearing a hole in his shirt.

Chucky howled.

A horrible scream that was even louder than the rat-a-ta-tat of the guns popping all around the rock.

The grenade slipped from Chucky's hand and rolled away.

Toward De Silva, who was only feet away. She saw it too. For a second Andy and De Silva's eyes met. The grenade was right there, right in front of her.

"No!" Andy yelled.

So brave, thought Andy.

There's only a second left. Andy watched, horrified. When there was this *yell.*

27

It must have happened fast.

But Andy seemed to have so much time to watch it. It all seemed to go so slowly. De Silva trying to get up and away from the grenade. Then someone running in from the side.

Somebody running kind of slow. Somebody not in great shape.

Whitehurst. He ran next to De Silva. And he threw himself on the grenade.

Just as it exploded.

Whitehurst's body disappeared in a tremendous explosion. There was smoke and the air was filled with a burning smell. Andy closed his eyes.

He was sprayed by debris, bits and pieces of stone and wood and something else, something wet.

A smoky cloud covered everything. Andy couldn't see whether De Silva was still there, if Tyler, or . . .

The smoke hovered there for a second.

Guns were still firing. The idiotic red team was still blasting away with their live ammo, oblivious.

A breeze suddenly whipped out of nowhere, and the smoky cloud moved away.

Andy saw a ghost. De Silva standing there.

Whitehurst was gone. Chucky was . . .

Gone.

De Silva looked at the spot where Whitehurst had fallen. She looked up at Andy, crying. I never expected her to cry, he thought. People like De Silva don't cry. But she did.

She said, quietly, so quietly that Andy almost didn't hear it. "He saved my life. Whitehurst saved my life."

Andy ran up to her. A bullet pinged nearby.

"Stop firing!" Andy yelled to the night, to the forest. "You have live ammo. Stop."

He turned around. "What! Where's Tyler? Where's . . ."

De Silva finished the thought. "Chucky's gone. He's—"

"Tyler," Andy said. "He's after Tyler."

De Silva turned around. She saw something. "There. I see

something. I see someone running."

"Let's go!" Andy said, and they ran off, following the kid, running from Chucky.

No one can help me, Tyler thought. Not Barclay. Not De Silva.

Not my dad.

No one.

I thought that they were all so strong. But Chucky is stronger. He's going to get me. Steal my soul. And then cut me up with that knife of his.

And no one can help me . . .

But myself.

Tyler pumped his arms as hard as he could, sucking in the air, running into the branches. Not caring that they hurt him.

Got to get away, that's all, thought Tyler. Keep running, and then run some more. If I run fast enough, and far enough, Chucky won't get me.

Keep. Running.

He saw something ahead.

He saw lights moving through the trees, making the shadows dance as if they were alive.

Tyler looked up. He saw a road just ahead. The forest ended, and there was a road. He saw cars, moving fast.

'Cause they don't want to stop here. They don't want to be in the woods, all alone.

Tyler ran even harder.

He heard himself grunting. I can run faster than him. He's only a doll. He's got little legs. I can run faster than him.

Tyler came to a down slope leading to the highway. He leaped and jumped his way down, nearly falling, but keeping his balance just enough to stumble down to the side of the highway.

A car was roaring toward him. The lights were blinding. Big white eyes that didn't see him. The driver has to see me, Tyler thought. He has to see me and stop. Tyler raised his arms and waved.

But the car went right past. It swerved right by him, leaving only the smell of the exhaust.

Tyler turned to the woods, to the crumbled bushes and the tall roadside grass crushed by his body. He looked for Chucky.

But he wasn't there.

Then, in the distance, another car was coming toward him.

Tyler started waving his arms wildly.

Please, he thought. Please stop. I'm only a kid. Please stop and take me away. Chucky won't get me if I'm in a car going away real fast.

Please.

Again, the driver didn't seem to see him.

There was a snap behind him. The sharp snap of a twig breaking. Then a rustling sound.

Coming to get me.

Tyler looked at the dark brush, at the forest. He heard more rustling.

Then Tyler looked back at the road, at the car.

Tyler ran out into the highway. He raised his arms, waving them crazily.

"Hey!" he yelled.

Oh, please. The car will have to stop.

It didn't slow down.

And then—as if it had just seen him—the car slowed, and screeched to a stop.

A red flashing light came to life on top of the car.

It's a police car, thought Tyler. A police car!

He waited.

There was no more rustling.

The car doors opened on each side, and two people got out. Tyler stood there, shivering in the cold.

He heard a radio inside the car and the sound of someone talking.

They walked over to Tyler. One was a man, the other was a lady. They looked at him with serious faces. The lady cop put a hand on Tyler.

"What's the matter? What's wrong?"

"You from Kent?" the other cop said.

Tyler looked back to the woods. There was no sign of Chucky. Oh, where is he? Is he hiding, waiting for these people to go away? Where is he?

Tyler spoke. "Charles is after me."

Tyler heard his own voice. He realized that he was sobbing. He tried to talk as his chest heaved. "Charles is going to get me."

The lady cop gave him a squeeze.

"It's okay now, honey. And who's this Charles?"

Tyler looked up at her. She seemed nice. And she had a gun. That could stop Charles. A gun could stop him. Sure.

“Who’s after you?” the man said.

“Charles!” Tyler repeated. Don’t they understand? Charles is after me. Tyler looked back at the woods. There was nothing there. And now Tyler got even more scared.

Is he hiding again? Is he waiting to jump out at me?

The policeman crouched down. He put a hand on Tyler’s shoulder.

“We have to leave,” Tyler said. “We have to get out of here.”

The policeman smiled. There’s nothing to smile about. Doesn’t he know that?

“Slow down, son. Just what are you doing out here in the middle of the night?”

There’s no time. We have to go, Tyler thought.

He reached out and touched the policeman, begging. “He wants to take my soul.”

The policeman looked away, still smiling, to the woman. And Tyler knew: He doesn’t believe me. He thinks I’m imagining all this.

The woman said, “Honey, you’re from Kent, right? Why don’t we just bring you back there?”

She look his hand. Tyler looked over his shoulder again.

She started leading him to the car. Yeah, that was a good idea. Tyler let her lead him away, away from the woods, away from Chucky.

Tyler heard the police radio, and that sounded good. I like the radio making all that noise. It makes me feel safe, as though there are a lot of people watching out for me.

Tyler got into the car, sliding onto the front seat.

The policeman got behind the wheel, and the woman sat beside him.

Tyler was in between the two of them.

The man started the car.

We’re almost out of here.

And Tyler thought: Now I feel safe. Now everything’s okay.

The policewoman patted Tyler’s knee.

Then she reached down and picked up the radio. Tyler watched her. It’s like the walkie-talkie that Chucky had. It’s the same thing.

She spoke into it.

“Dispatch, this is Lincoln eighteen. We found a lost boy on Route 89 and we’re running him back home to the Kent School.”

A voice inside the radio said, “Roger, Lincoln eighteen.”

The policewoman went to hang up the radio.

“I’m not lost,” Tyler said. “I’m running away. I *told* you that.”

"Oh, is that right?" the man said. "What are you running away from?"

Tyler shook his head. "I told you. I *told* you already. I'm running from Charles."

Tyler looked out at the dark highway. Their headlights no longer seemed so bright to Tyler, sitting inside the car.

"I told you. He tricked me. I thought he was my best friend. But he tricked me."

The policewoman gave his leg another pat. "But what's your name?"

"Tyler," he said, saluting. "Ronald Tyler, private first class."

She laughed. "At ease, private."

Tyler brought his hand down.

"I know," the policewoman said, "how much it hurts when a friend does something bad to you."

Tyler nodded. "Yeah, it sure does."

"And I bet that your friend—what's his name?"

"Charles. But Andy calls him Chucky."

"I bet that Charles didn't mean it. I bet he's real sorry."

Even before she finished her sentence. Tyler started shaking his head. "I don't think so. Not Charles. I don't think that he's sorry at all."

The woman made a funny face, as if what Tyler said made her sad.

But then she smiled, as if she had a wonderful secret. Tyler turned and looked at the other cop. He had a grin on his face too.

What's going on? thought Tyler. What are they smiling about?

"Well," the policewoman said, "I know what will cheer you up."

Tyler liked surprises. He liked it when his father brought him things from overseas. Toys from Japan, rocket ships and hand-held video games that you can't buy in America. Tyler liked that.

The policewoman reached over the back seat and grabbed something.

"Look what we found a way back on the road, just sitting there."

Tyler watched her pull something from the backseat to the front and drop it on Tyler's lap.

Charles. Chucky.

A Good Guy.

And Tyler screamed, screamed as loud as he could.

The moon, a thin leering sliver of a smile hung over the hills, finally

giving Andy and De Silva some light.

Now they could see how lost they were.

De Silva grabbed Andy.

"No. This isn't doing any good, Andy. We're just running in circles, getting nowhere."

Andy nodded. He didn't recognize anything, but he knew that they had passed one trail marker at least twice.

"We're not going to find him this way."

"God," Andy said. "He's got him. Chucky's probably got the kid."

De Silva shook her head.

"Don't bet on it. Tyler's a tough kid."

Andy thought of Whitehurst. How scared he was, how he wouldn't come with Andy to rescue Tyler.

Don't wimp out on me, I said to him. And then Whitehurst said that if you hear it enough times, you start to believe . . . you believe what everyone else says about you.

And Andy thought: No one will ever say that again, Whitehurst. No one will ever forget what you did tonight.

He rubbed at his eyes. They stung, and started to tear.

Andy looked away, and he saw light, headlights.

"Is that a road down there?" he asked.

De Silva nodded. "I guess so."

"Come on!" he said, and he darted down the slope to the highway.

Tyler screamed at the doll. Pushing at it, pushing it away as it grinned at him, inanimately pretending to be just a doll, while the two cops looked at Tyler and wanted to know what was wrong.

"Charles!" Tyler screamed. "It's Charles!"

Then Chucky moved, so fast that Tyler thought maybe it was just his own kicking and screaming.

Chucky moved his arm down to the holster of the cop driving the patrol car.

"No!" Tyler yelled.

But then Chucky whipped the gun up and pointed it right at Tyler's head.

"Hit the brakes!" Chucky said.

* * *

The headlights weren't moving.

Andy stopped De Silva at the edge of the highway.

"Wait! Something's wrong down there. There's something . . ."

The car was on the side of the road, in a ditch, pointing down. The front door was open.

"Maybe the police found Tyler," De Silva said. "They probably saw him."

Andy nodded. Yes, that's probably it. He let De Silva pull him along, closer to the car.

The light from inside the car spilled onto the highway. He heard the radio.

"Lincoln eighteen, come in please."

No one was answering. They must have walked away, Andy thought. They saw something and walked away.

"Lincoln eighteen, please acknowledge."

"Wait a second," Andy said. He pulled back against De Silva.

Instead of walking right up to the open door of the patrol car, he circled behind it. De Silva followed.

"Andy? What is it? Why don't we just . . ."

The other door was open, tilting down, pointing at the ditch.

The radio kept asking: "Lincoln eighteen? Come in. Lin—"

Andy walked to the open door, still staying well back from it.

He saw the policewoman, slumped over. He saw the big red dot on the side of her head. He watched it, still oozing, still fresh.

Next to her, he saw another cop, a man. His head was back. But he also had a hole in his head. His eyes were open, looking up.

He can't be stopped, thought Andy. There's no way to stop him.

No matter what, he just keeps coming back.

"Oh, god, Andy, oh, god." De Silva—right next to him—groaned.

"Careful. He might be here. Anywhere. He's got Tyler. He has to do the ceremony, but he could . . ."

Andy heard something.

A voice, somewhere in the woods by the side of the road. More cadets, he wondered. Or . . .

He looked back in the car. He saw that the driver's holster was empty, but the woman still had her gun. Andy reached in. His hand, shaking nervously, brushed against the stream of blood red lava pouring down. Andy quickly unfastened the holster and took out the gun.

"Okay. Okay, now," he said, holding the gun, feeling ridiculous. What do I know about guns? Trying to calm himself.

He put it into his pocket.

"Andy," De Silva said. "There. Look!"

De Silva pointed down the road. And Andy saw a boy—Tyler. He was holding Chucky and running away.

"Come on!" De Silva said.

Andy ran down the road.

There's no getting away, thought Tyler.

Not from Charles, not from Chucky. Tyler held the doll close, just like Chucky ordered. Tyler felt the gun barrel pointing at his ribs.

He heard the carnival music. The amusement park was just ahead.

"Come on, kid, step on it. We'll get lost in fun land while everyone's out hunting for us. Move it!"

Tyler nodded. He passed under a bright neon sign. There were so many people here, but they just smiled at Tyler. He was just a kid holding his doll.

Then Tyler saw another kid holding a Good Guy. The kid smiled at Tyler.

"Smile back," whispered Chucky. "Smile at the nice little boy."

Tyler forced a smile.

He kept walking. The round-up was to his left. The ride was just starting. People were pressed against the metal hoop, spinning faster and faster. Tyler kept walking—and then he heard the floor fall away. People screamed.

"No," Chucky whispered, talking like a ventriloquist. "Over there."

Tyler smelled cotton candy. And hot dogs with mustard. People were laughing. Everyone was so happy.

Tyler trudged deeper into the amusement park.

De Silva ran ahead of Andy to the amusement park.

"Why is he going in there?" Andy called to her.

De Silva, faster, trotting ahead, shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe to get away from us. To lose us. More police will come now, too."

To get away. She's probably right, thought Andy. But it's going to be hard for Chucky to find some place to perform his ceremony in there with so many people around.

Ade due, Damballa.

The kid's got a chance, thought Andy.

He followed De Silva under the neon sign. Funland, it said.

Andy ran into the crowd, behind De Silva.

They passed by the roller coaster. The clackety-clack of the string of cars was so noisy. Tyler kept walking. The noise stopped, and then there was the sound of the cars rolling down the first hill, followed by the screams.

Another hill, and more screams.

Just ahead, Tyler saw the Ferris wheel. It seemed like such a quiet ride. People get in and gently fly above the park into the sky.

Tyler came to a corner and saw the bumper cars, spitting sparks of electricity into the air. There were big kids here.

He took another step.

When someone tapped his shoulder.

Tyler turned around.

There were three kids grinning at him.

"Hey, kid, what'cha got there?"

The kids laughed. They were big, mean-looking kids. The kid that spoke stepped close. He reached toward Chucky, rubbing his orange hair. "Hey, this is one of those Good Guys. It's a Good Guy, isn't it?"

Tyler nodded.

Sure it is.

The kid nodded to his friends. "He's excellent." He asked his buddies. "Don't you think he's an excellent doll?"

The kid, his face looking even meaner, like he could punch Tyler without even thinking about it, came right up to Tyler.

"I'll take him."

Tyler didn't do anything. Chucky nudged the gun closer, jabbing him in the ribs.

The bully grabbed Tyler's collar. "Hey, didn't you hear what I said, geek? Hand 'em over!"

Then Chucky turned his head.

He turned it right to the bully, who was still grinning.

Chucky sneered right at him, and said, "Screw off!"

The kid backed away. He bumped into his friends, and then they all turned and darted away.

It was dark here. Only the bumper cars were nearby on the right, next to some boarded up game stalls.

Chucky looked around.

"Over there," he said, gesturing to the right.

And Tyler felt the gun jab him.

Andy looked at De Silva. They were in a sea of people, all of them

laughing. There were couples hanging on each other, parents with little kids, teenagers running around.

De Silva shook her head. “We’ll never find him in this mess.”

Andy chewed his lip. It looked hopeless. When . . .

He saw a little kid moving down one of the alleyways between the games. The kid held something. When the kid turned a bit, orange hair caught the light.

“There he is. We got him.” Andy darted off, following the kid. He ran full out, right at the kid.

Chucky’s got a gun on him. I’ll just hit the doll, knock the gun away.

Andy ran up to the kid. He smashed the doll and it went flying to the ground, talking as it flew through the air.

“Hi! I’m Paulie, and I’m your friend to the end! Hidey-ho, ha-ha-ha!”

Andy looked at the doll. And then at the little boy who ran to it, a little blond-haired kid. He said, “Hey!” as he scooped his doll off the ground. The boy’s parents were just in front of him.

“Watch where you’re going!”

Andy backed way, nodding. “I’m sorry. I . . .”

He spun around, and found himself staring right at another Good Guy doll. A young girl held this one. Andy shook his head.

He ran back to the midway, seeing De Silva standing there. She stood next to two kids fighting over a Good Guy doll, pulling on it.

“It’s mine,” one said.

“No,” the other screamed, “it’s *mine.”*

“What’s going on?” Andy said to her.

Looking into the crowd, he saw that it was littered with Good Guys. There were Good Guys everywhere. And he heard them all speaking at the same time.

“Hi, I’m Tommy.”

“Hi, I’m Wally.”

“Wanna play? Hidey-ho!”

“Wanna—wanna—wanna—”

“I’m—!”

Andy covered his his ears. “Where are they coming from?”

De Silva pointed to a booth just behind him. Andy turned around. He saw the sign.

GOOD GUYS—WE’RE BACK!

The booth was filled with Good Guys, some pinned to the wall,

others sitting on shelves, a few in front, near a huckster yelling at the crowd.

"Good Guys! Get your Good Guys here!"

The huckster turned and spoke to the dolls, demonstrating. Andy drifted closer.

"So what's your name, sonny?"

A doll turned its head and said, "Hi, I'm Richey. Wanna play?"

Then the huckster turned to the audience, grinning, so pleased with his wares. "Ain't they something? Get one now, folks, 'cause they won't last. No sirree. Bring one home for the kiddie. Buy one for your sweetheart."

"This is a nightmare," Andy said.

De Silva grabbed his arm. "We'll never find them in here."

Two kids with dolls drifted by, and Andy heard a chorus of hidey-hos.

Then, the crowd seemed to part, as if one half drifted to the right and the other left. There was an opening. And there—down at the other end—

Andy saw Tyler.

"Tyler!" he said. The boy still held the doll. Andy patted the gun in his pocket, then grabbed De Silva's hand and started to run. The opening disappeared. The crowd came together, and Andy had to squirm his way past each person.

While Tyler vanished.

28

“I saw them too, kid. It’s no good down here, now. Get moving.”

Tyler stood there. He had seen Andy and De Silva. They were there. His real friends, coming to save him.

“You losing your hearing, little twerp? I said *get moving.”*

Tyler felt the gun, the cold metal twisting against his ribs.

“Go up there. Now, run!” Chucky said.

Tyler held the doll tight and ran away. They were moving closer to the sound of the calliope. Tyler heard the thumping of the drum. Jingling bells. The strange wheezing sound of the organ.

He saw the carousel, the roof looking like a funny hat strung with red and blue and yellow lights.

It was the carousel.

I was on a carousel once, Tyler thought. My dad took me. And this man put these rings in this arm and I tried to grab them. But I couldn’t—not until Dad helped me, holding me up, away from the horse.

It felt great to hook the ring.

“Wait a second,” Chucky said. “Wait.”

Tyler watched the doll, turning to look back.

“Damn, they’re still coming. That damn Andy Barclay just won’t give up. You know what I’m going to have to do to him, huh, kid? Just what I did to those two stupid cops. I’ll have to ventilate old Andy’s head.”

Chucky turned, looking at the spinning carousel. He nudged Tyler. “Go up that way.”

Tyler ran up the ramp.

He whispered in Tyler’s ear. “Keep moving, kid. It’s called cutting the line. Let me know if you want me to blow any of the rubes away.”

Tyler pushed his way through the crowd, a small kid nudging past grown-ups. Tyler moved to the front of the line. The operator looked down and saw him.

“Hey, kid. What are you doing? Wait in line. You’ll get on the next . . .”

“Let’s *go,* Tyler.” Chucky hissed. “Get on the damn carousel—now!”

Tyler ducked under the chain and ran past the operator, who yelled at him.

The horses sped by, and the music thumped loudly.

"Get on!" Chucky yelled.

Tyler chewed his lip. He waited until there was a space between horses, and then he jumped onto the spinning platform.

The sound of the calliope grew in Andy's ears, the thumping, the jingling sounds, the bellows making the organ pipes hoot.

"Where are they?" De Silva said.

Andy pointed straight ahead at the carousel. "There."

He saw Tyler, standing right next to the spinning platform, watching a horse go up while the operator ran over to him.

A little boy holding a doll.

Andy saw the gun.

He thought: the poor kid. And, once again, Andy remembered his promise. What he was going to do to Chucky.

A million pieces.

De Silva grabbed his arm. "Oh, god, Andy. He's going to jump onto the carousel."

But even as she said the words. Andy watched Tyler jump onto the disk. The movement of the platform made the kid fall, roll forward. The crowd gasped, watching the strange scene.

Still holding the doll, Tyler rolled forward and hit his head against the upraised hoof of one of the hovses.

"We have to get to him," Andy explained, moving again, pushing through the line of people.

De Silva followed him as he made his way to the carousel, to Tyler.

To Chucky.

"Get up, squirt. Get your little black butt up!"

Tyler nodded. Tyler's head hurt where he had banged it on the merry-go-round horse.

The operator was still yelling at him.

"Hey, kid. Stay down. Just stay down now!"

He doesn't see Chucky, Tyler thought. Doesn't see Chucky holding a gun up to me.

Tyler felt the merry-go-round slow. And then Chucky kicked him. "I said get the hell up and get ready to jump off—at the back."

As the disk slowed, Tyler stood up and got ready to jump off.

He saw Barclay, and then, just behind him, De Silva. They're coming for me, he thought. They're coming to rescue me!

"Get ready," Chucky hissed in his ear. "Ready . . . ready!"

The carousel slowed down even more. And Tyler faced the back of the carousel building, which was an empty lot. There was tall grass here and empty cans. Faraway, another ride glowed in the night, fiery red.

"Now!" Chucky yelled. "Now!" And Tyler jumped off.

Tyler landed on concrete. A small fence cut him off from the lot.

"Over you go, Tyler. Just make sure that you don't drop the Chuck man."

Tyler climbed over the fence, clutching the horrible doll close, crying again. Because he just kept getting more and more scared.

Andy jumped onto the slowing carousel, followed by De Silva.

The operator looked up and started yelling. "Hey, what are you two doing? What the hell are you . . ."

De Silva turned to Andy, the lights spinning, the operator there, then gone, then there.

The music slowing.

"I don't see them, Andy. They've gone."

Andy nodded.

Then, as they spun to the back, Andy saw someone moving through the empty lot behind the carousel. But he was spun away before he could get a good look.

He grabbed De Silva's arm. "I think I saw them. Get ready. We're going to jump off."

Andy waited until he was once again facing the lot, and then he leaped off the carousel. He landed hard, his knees smacking against the concrete walkway around the ride.

De Silva—after a more adroit landing—helped him up.

He looked up at her. "Thanks."

But when Andy got to his feet, she said, "Are you sure that you saw them?" De Silva looked out at the lot. "I don't see see anything."

As soon as they were out of the tall grass and on concrete again. Chucky leaned close to Tyler's ear and said, "Go right, you little shit. Move it."

Tyler turned and ran. He saw red glowing lights. But Chucky was guiding him away from the lights, down an alley to the side.

Tyler half walked, half ran, stumbling along, moving when Chucky told him to move, stopping when he told him to stop. Like now.

"Okay, stop here."

They were next to a big red metal door. There was a sign on it that said, Employees Only.

"Let's see if it's our lucky day," Chucky said. Tyler didn't move. "That means, try the door, buddy boy."

Tyler reached out and tugged at the heavy metal door. It didn't budge.

"Pull a bit harder."

Tyler pulled back with all his weight. The door opened with a horrible groaning sound.

"There you are. I guess we are lucky."

Tyler heard screams inside. It must be a ride of some kind. It had been hard to see, running here, he was crying so much.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Get your butt inside."

Chucky jabbed him with the gun.

And Tyler thought: I'll go in here. And Andy and De Silva will never find me.

That will be it.

Tyler hesitated a second.

Chucky jabbed him again. "Move it!"

And Tyler walked inside, into the darkness, wondering why people were screaming.

"No. They can't have disappeared," Andy said. He quickly clambered over the fence and started running through the grass.

He heard De Silva right behind him.

As he ran, he checked the dark grass in case Tyler had fallen or was hiding.

Then De Silva yelled at him. "Andy, look over there!"

Andy stopped, and looked in the direction De Silva pointed. A red glow filled the misty air around the ride.

Andy read the letters of the ride.

Devil's Lair.

A leering Satan looked out at them, his eyes rolling back and forth. Skeletons and ghouls danced on the façade of the building. Colorful cars were lined up for a ride into the lair.

"I don't see . . ."

"There!" De Silva said, "Down the alley, the side entrance."

Andy saw an alley that ran down one side of the Devil's Lair. But so what?

Then he saw the side door shutting.

“Good eyes, Kristin.”

They both tore off toward the side entrance to Devil’s Lair.

It sounded like a roller coaster—only it was inside. It was an indoor ride. Tyler heard the clattering of cars rolling through the building, climbing up ramps. There were sirens that screamed out, and then the screams of people in the cars and the banging of doors all around them.

Tyler couldn’t see anything.

Just a thin slit of greenish light straight ahead, behind doors.

“There, kid. Move toward the light, bozo. This place is damn near perfect.”

Tyler took a step, and then stumbled on the metal track used by the cars. He fell to the floor. Chucky nearly slipped out of his arms.

“Uh-uh. Be careful with the goods, bro. You nearly dropped me there, clumsy. Now up. Get a move on.”

Tyler got to his feet and ran to the door. He pushed it open. The sick green light fell on his face.

And he saw a cemetery.

Tyler looked at the cemetery, filled with tombstones, some cracked, a few lying on the ground.

“Perfecto!” Chucky said. “That one will do, right over there.”

Chucky pointed to a tombstone lying on the ground.

Tyler carried the doll there. “Now put me down.”

Tyler lowered Chucky to the tombstone. “Okay, it’s time to play.”

But then the boy heard a rattling behind him. A while light flashed. There was a siren and screaming.

A car full of people burst into the scene.

The graveyard suddenly came to life. A skeleton flew out of an open hole, a ghost dropped down from the roof. Hands started growing out of the ground.

“No, no, no!” Tyler screamed.

The people in the car saw him, watched him, but continued to laugh.

They think I’m just like the other tricks, just a machine. He looked at the people in the car, screaming and laughing, as the car wove its way through the cemetery. A bat on wires swooped down at him, filling the room with its horrible squeaks. A rotten corpse stumbled from the back.

“My kind of people,” Chucky said.

Tyler shook his head. On the other side, he saw a stone house for dead people. The door opened. Something glowed inside. A gigantic moan filled the cemetery.

Tyler bit his lip. He tasted blood. He stepped backward and stumbled, falling, rolling.

He felt the cold metal of the track.

When he looked up, the car was coming right toward him, as the people screamed even louder.

A most excellent place, thought Chucky. Why, there isn't a better place to perform the final ritual and terminate this little sucker.

Chucky saw a skeleton trying to pull itself out of a rotten coffin.

Keep pluggin' away, babe, he thought.

Tyler was crying, screaming.

And then the kid slipped away. Chucky turned. "Hey!" he said.

But the kid had fallen onto the track.

Hell, Chucky thought. The stupid kid's trying to turn himself into hamburger. The car's going to plow right into him.

Chucky stood up. All this work to get somebody, and now he's going to kill himself?

A brilliant light flashed, a giant blinding strobe. Chucky blinked. And when he opened his eyes, the car rumbled out of the cemetery.

Chucky looked at the track. There was no one there. Tyler should have been there, squashed. But he wasn't.

Chucky hopped off his tombstone.

The brat is still here. Inside a pretend grave, maybe hiding behind a cardboard tombstone.

Still here.

I keep letting myself get distracted, Chucky thought. I keep letting that happen. No more screwing around, he thought. The gloves are off. The kid's still here, and he's dead meat.

He's mine.

Andy tugged on the side door, and it opened. De Silva grabbed his shoulder, and they entered the house of screams together.

"I can't see a thing," De Silva said.

Andy nodded, and then—realizing that De Silva couldn't see him—he said, "Yes."

But as his eyes adjusted to the dark, he saw a thin sliver of grayish green light ahead. Somewhere behind them a car rattled.

"There's some light," he said.

Holding De Silva's hand tightly, he walked toward the greenish slit. Toward the door.

Tyler looked around the tombstone. The car had nearly smashed into him. He just had time to leap away, rolling behind the stone.

In the back the tombstone was just plain wood, not even painted. He peered around the edge, looking for Chucky.

The skeletons, the ghosts, the bats were all quiet, waiting for the next car.

I don't see him, Tyler thought. Maybe he left, maybe he went someplace else. To some other scary room in here.

Tyler looked behind him. The little stone house was just behind him. He heard the terrible rattle of one of those cars riding the metal rail coming closer.

Then—with a tremendous kick—the doors flew open. Tyler yelped, startled.

Again the graveyard came to life.

He saw skeletons rising from the ground and ghoulie guys crawling around.

Then—just by his feet—a skeleton grabbed his ankle. Its bony fingers seemed to close and lock on Tyler's ankle.

Tyler scrambled away, scurrying like a crab.

Right into Chucky.

"Hey, kid. Long time, no see," the doll said.

Chucky pointed his gun right at Tyler's head. Tyler backed away, tripping on the skeleton, feeling its rubber body beneath him writhing.

"Stop. Get back here!" Chucky yelled.

Tyler looked around. The door to the stone house was open.

Tyler crawled, real fast, into the stone house, into—he read the word as he rolled inside—into the *crypt.*

The car rattled out of the graveyard, kicking open doors, leaving the cemetery.

The door to the crypt slammed shut.

Tyler was safe.

But, but . . .

He felt someone—something—watching him.

Tyler was breathing hard. He heard himself breathing in and out, in and out, the sound so loud inside this small room.

He felt it.

Behind him.

And so, still panting, still sucking in air as fast as he could—but now smelling this place, this small enclosed room, this crypt—he turned around.

And he saw a skeleton, grinning at him, and glowing just like one of those watches that glows in the dark.

Grinning at Tyler.

The boy watched it, thinking: *He knows.*

He knows that there will be another car. The door will open.

And Chucky will be there waiting.

29

Andy pushed open the door.

"God!" De Silva said. "It's a cemetery—creepy!"

"Yeah. But perfect for Chucky." Andy looked around. He saw tombstones and some slumped-over skeletons.

Lots of gray, green, and black.

But no orange and red and blue.

Andy shook his head. "I don't see him."

De Silva took a step into the cemetery. She called out: "Tyler? Tyler . . . are you here?"

Andy yelled, "Tyler? Are you here? Ty . . ."

He heard something. A muffled voice, coming from . . .

Andy saw the crypt, shut tight. Then, again, the muffled voice, "I'm in here!"

Andy ran over to the crypt with De Silva. He banged on the side of the crypt. "Tyler. Is that you?"

"Yes. I'm in here and—"

"Hang on, Tyler," Andy said. Andy started feeling the outside of the crypt, looking for a way in. He felt the wood seams, digging his fingernails in.

He moved to the back. "Just hang on, Tyler."

Andy looked at De Silva, who was also looking for a door or latch, some way into the pretend crypt. She looked up at him and shrugged.

"We're coming, Tyler, just . . ."

Tyler looked at the glowing skeleton.

It's just sitting there, Tyler thought. Sitting there, watching me.

It's not real, he told himself. Not a real skeleton. Just something somebody made.

He heard Andy pounding on the outside of the crypt, feeling the sides.

Tyler looked at the skeleton. He reached out a hand to touch it, wanting to feel it for some reason. He chewed his lip.

It's not real, he told himself.

Close. Almost touching those bony fingers that glowed in the dark.

Closer.

And then—from behind the skeleton—another hand reached out.

Chucky's hand.

"Surprise, kiddo."

Chucky's plastic fingers locked on Tyler's hand. They were so strong. Tyler yelled and squirmed. He heard Andy calling to him.

Chucky had been in here all the time.

Then Tyler heard the rattling noise, the crazy clackety-clack of another car roaring through the cemetery. The door to the crypt popped open, and the glowing skeleton moved, pushing Chucky.

He let Tyler's hand slip away.

They can't save me, Tyler thought. Barclay and De Silva can't do anything.

The boy ran out and across the tracks just as the car was about to come.

Chucky saw Tyler. He saw the car. There might not be enough time, he thought. The car might catch me, slam right into me. And I know how my body is starting to feel. It's like skin now, like flesh.

It would hurt bad if that car rammed into me.

Chucky shook his head and then darted out, taking as big steps as his little legs would allow. Big, bigger. He heard the screams, the squealing of the metal wheels on the track.

Shit. I'm not going to make it, he thought. But right there, on the track, he leaped, and he felt a breeze dust his little doll butt.

Way to go, he thought. Good Guys always finish first.

Tyler was running out an opening in the back of the cemetery scene.

Barclay and De Silva were cut off by the car.

Suckers, thought Chucky, as he ran after Tyler.

Andy didn't notice that the crypt had opened until the haunted house car was right there, squealing in their ears. He saw a teenage girl break away from a kiss and look over at them, stupidly grinning.

When the car passed, he saw Tyler on the other side, crawling through an opening.

And Chucky was just behind him.

"Tyler!" he yelled.

They disappeared.

The car roared past. Andy grabbed De Silva and pulled her to the other side, past the tombstone, to the next room.

Tyler stopped. A dozen Tylers stopped. Some looked right at him,

some looked off into space. Tyler turned, and the reflections from a dozen mirrors turned.

Tyler looked around. He took some steps. Turned. Took some more steps. He didn't know where to go.

There was great rumbling, and the haunted house car kicked into the hall of mirrors. And now there were dozens of cars, hundreds of kids inside the cars, screaming, yelling, laughing. The tracks climbed up, weaving through the mirrors.

Tyler tried to follow the real car, to see the way out. But then it would disappear, melting into nothing, as another reflection took its place.

The car came right at Tyler. He looked down. He wasn't standing on any track. How could it?

But it was coming right at him, rumbling, shaking.

Then the great rumbling of the metal wheels roared around his ears before turning away, a dozen cars disappearing all at once.

When it disappeared, he saw Chucky there.

And there, and there, and . . .

Everywhere. Regular-sized Chuckys and big, stretched-out Chuckys and tiny, squashed Chuckys, all sneering.

There has to be a way out of here, Tyler thought. Somewhere.

The Chuckys spoke. With one voice.

"Here's looking at you, kid."

And all the Chuckys laughed, the tall ones shaking like strange stick men, the squashed-up ones vibrating like Jell-O.

One of them is real, thought Tyler.

But which one?

He took a step. Another. Yes, he thought. I seem to be moving away from the Chuckys. Another step.

Then all the Chuckys raised their guns.

Tyler froze. And Chucky started firing. The mirrors shattered, and the Chucky reflections fell to the ground, one by one.

And Tyler realized: He's shooting at me, shooting at my reflections. He doesn't know which is the real me. So he's shooting at each reflection.

Until he gets me.

Tyler backed up. Another shot, and the sound of another shattering mirror filled the room.

The boy turned around.

And he saw Andy and De Silva—a bunch of them—and De Silva was

holding a gun.

Andy yelled at Tyler, "Run."

Yes. But which way? Oh, god, which way? Another shot, more shattered mirrors. Tyler saw a hole, an opening leading to darkness, away from the crazy mirrors.

He ran into the darkness.

It was so dark here. Tyler heard more screams from inside the building. But he couldn't see anything.

'Cause they want to surprise them. They want everyone to have a thrill.

Tyler heard a car coming.

Then I'll be able to see something, he thought. The car will come and everything will come to life.

Closer, the rattling above him. The car was going to enter from somewhere up there, in the darkness.

The sound of a door being kicked open.

And then Tyler heard something else. A small clicking noise and then a whoosh. He looked up.

And he saw a giant curved blade, a . . . a *pendulum.* Swinging toward him.

Tyler hit the floor. The blade whooshed over him and he felt the breeze made by the blade. He crawled to his feet.

The car came into the room, and then there were flames above him. The car had to crash through flames. Tyler looked at it. Everything was orange. The flames looked so *real.* But they couldn't be real, Tyler thought.

The car curved down past the flames. The pendulum swung back, now taking a swipe at the passengers in the car, missing them as they screamed.

The haunted house car went away.

I'll follow the track, Tyler thought. That's what I should do. Follow the track. That way I can get outside, and I can run some more.

He stepped onto the track and started climbing up to where the flames had been.

This will get me out.

He stepped carefully, climbing the track. Climbing up.

There was a small glow up here, from the next room—whatever it was.

I don't like this place, thought Tyler. I never want to go on a haunted house ride. Never, ever.

Something moved in front of him, at his feet. Something climbed

up, through the slats of the track, and faced Tyler.

It was Chucky.

“You sure know how to make a Good Guy work for his soul,” Chucky said.

The doll laughed.

His crazy laugh. His terrible laugh. Tyler stepped back and stumbled. His arm went out to the side. And he felt his hand hit a switch, some kind of switch tripped by the haunted house car as it roared by.

Tyler was flat on his back. And when he looked up he saw the pendulum swinging down, right at Chucky.

“I guess,” Chucky said, “that this is as good a place as any for our picnic.”

He doesn’t see the pendulum.

Doesn’t see it, Tyler thought.

Then Chucky heard it. The whoosh. He looked up.

Just as the pendulum sliced through his head, slicing off his face, as if it were sharpening a pencil. Chucky’s face, sneer and all, flipped down to the ground.

Tyler screamed at what he saw then.

It looked like a machine, inside the head, but there was also blood and skin and bits of bone with wires coming out.

Part machine, part human.

Or something.

Tyler screamed at it, just kept screaming at it. But Chucky reached down to the ground and picked up the sliced-off section of his head.

“Got to put my face on,” he said. “Actually, in a few seconds, it will be *your* face.”

But the face didn’t stick too well. It kept slipping and sliding over the blood and wires. Chucky grunted and pressed it hard against his head. Tyler heard a sucking noise and—though Chucky’s face was tilted—it didn’t slide off.

Chucky reached into his pocket. He pulled out his knife.

Chucky bent down, close to Tyler. But then the boy heard the rumbling of another haunted house car, close now, nearly at the door.

Chucky, his face all lopsided, stilted, like a pizza that slid to one side, reached down and pulled Tyler up.

“Come on,” he said, his voice even more weird, as if muffled by the fluid inside his head. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

Chucky stuck the blade into Tyler’s side.

“Pick me up, big boy. It’s traveling time.”

30

Andy and De Silva followed the track, all the way to the outside.

De Silva put the gun away. “Andy. Where is he?”

Andy gestured back at Devil’s Lair. “They’re not in there. They have to be out here.”

The people in line laughed at them, wondering: Hey, what are you guys doing *walking* through the ride? Are you guys crazy?

Andy turned, looking out at Funland.

And he saw Tyler, moving down the midway, hurrying with the doll.

There was a breeze. It chilled Andy.

He started running, thinking: What if we’re too late? What if it already happened?

He ran. But the crowd closed around him, and he was trapped, amidst laughter and cotton candy, while Tyler and Chucky disappeared.

Chucky’s face still moved when he talked. Only it moved all wrong. The plastic bent and twisted in weird ways as Chucky talked.

“Over there,” Chucky said. “We’re going for a ride.”

Tyler looked up. It was a ride called the Zipper. Loud rap music boomed from a giant speaker. It was a big kids’ ride. A scary ride. Tyler didn’t want to go on it.

“Go on,” Chucky said, the knife playing with Tyler’s belly. “Get in line.”

The ride had arms, like a spider. At the end of each arm was a bubble. People sat in the bubble behind a mesh cage, while it spun around higher and higher, faster, spinning. The ride was just ending.

Tyler looked at some of the kids getting off. They looked scared.

Then it was time for the next batch. Tyler moved forward in the line.

“We don’t have a ticket,” Tyler said dully.

Maybe that will keep us off. Maybe.

“Don’t worry, kid. Old Chucky pocketed some from one of those kid’s back pockets. The jerk never even felt it.”

They moved forward in the line.

Until Tyler and Chucky were next to the operator.

"Whoa, sonny. Wait a minute. Aren't you a little young for this ride." The operator leaned down. "The merry-go-round's over there, kid."

Tyler felt the knife. He held out his ticket. The operator laughed. He looked at Chucky. "You sure your dolly is up for this?"

Tyler just held out the ticket.

The operator laughed. "What, are you deaf?"

"No, sir."

The operator shook his head and let Tyler in.

Tyler walked to one of the cages.

In a few seconds the operator came over and shut the cage.

"Isn't this cozy?" Chucky said.

Tyler watched the operator move over to a big lever. He grabbed it and pulled it down. Tyler heard a whirring noise, and the ride began to move, slowly at first, but then faster, rising into the air.

De Silva grabbed Andy's arm. They were still standing in a sea of people, milling about the midway, drifting from one game to another, from the hot dog man to the candy apple stand.

De Silva grabbed him and said, "Oh, god. Andy, look."

Andy saw the Zipper ride. And he heard the music. He saw the arms rotating and the round cages at the end, spinning.

One arm swung around.

And Andy saw Tyler and Chucky.

I see them, Tyler thought. Down there, watching me. It's just like I thought. There's nothing they can do.

Chucky held the knife against Tyler's throat. The boy felt the point of the blade biting into his skin.

"This is it, kid. End of the line."

Chucky reached out and put a hand on Tyler's brow. The cage spun around, pinning Tyler to his seat.

Tyler heard words . . . words he didn't understand.

"Ade due. Damballa . . . give me the power I beg of you."

Tyler heard a rumbling coming from the sky. Louder than the music, louder than the terrible thumping coming from the speakers. Tyler looked up. This is part of it, he thought. He saw lightning—a yellow finger, like the skeleton's finger—reach down to the ground. The stars started to disappear as something thick and dark rolled

across the sky.

There's nothing anyone can do, thought Tyler.

"Ade due, kenyu dictu. Mighty Damballa."

Tyler felt sick to his stomach.

It wasn't just from the ride.

They were close to the operator of the Zipper when Andy looked up and saw the storm clouds roll across the sky, a black gray carpet cut by the brilliant white zigzags of lightning.

The operator looked up too. "What the hell?"

Andy saw Tyler's compartment swing by. He saw just enough for Andy to get a glimpse of Chucky resting his hand on Tyler's head, the knife at his throat.

"He started the chant!" he said to De Silva.

Andy reached out and grabbed the beefy operator's arm.

"Stop the ride."

"What? Are you crazy?"

"Please—stop the ride. That little kid. He's . . ."

The operator shook his head. "Can't do that. It will piss off—"

There was a crash in the sky. Another roar, the rumbling of thunder close by. And then a big flash of electricity.

Tyler looked at Chucky's face. With each spin, it slipped a bit, sliding more to one side, exposing more of the inside of his head.

The doll had his eyes closed.

He mumbled strange words.

"Leveau mercier du bois chaloitte, secoisse entienne mais pois de morte."

Tyler heard the rumbling in his ears from the thunder clouds hanging above them. Then he saw this tremendous flash of electricity. It leaped from a cloud and stretched down toward him.

It's coming for me, Tyler thought.

But the white bolt jabbed right at the center of the Zipper, right at the engine that made it spin. There was a tremendous crash, and then sparks filled the air.

Chucky opened his eyes.

The ride slowed, and then it came to a stop. Tyler looked down. Everyone seemed so far away.

Something dripped from the side of Chucky's head. He closed his eyes.

Chucky kept saying the words.

“What the . . .” the operator said.

Andy turned to De Silva. “There’s still time,” he said. “Give me the gun.”

De Silva passed Andy the gun. The people in line screamed and backed away.

De Silva gave him a kiss, and then Andy hopped over the guardrail. He ran to the center of the ride, and then climbed onto the arm leading to Tyler’s compartment. Andy heard the operator yelling at him.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Andy held the gun tight and grabbed at the arm, feeling for ridges, bumps, wires, anything he could grab on to.

He looked up. The clouds were so close now, settling on top of the ride.

Andy climbed higher. He took another step, and his foot slipped. His hand reached out, snagging an electrical cord.

“Hey, get down!” he heard the operator yell.

He kept climbing.

The sphere—with Tyler and Chucky—was only feet away. And Andy heard the damned doll.

Singing out the words, calling upon the black force to release him, to exchange his body with Tyler’s.

“Adelle bois secois, Damballa! *Adelle bois seis,* Damballa!”

Then Tyler screamed, terrified, yelling, “Help! Please, someone, help!”

Andy clawed his way another few feet, almost touching the wire mesh of the compartment. Almost there.

Bringing the gun up.

Praying: Let me be in time. Don’t let all of this happen—and have me be too late.

Andy pulled himself onto the mesh, looking down, at Tyler, at Chucky.

When the bowie knife came jabbing upward.

The blade missed Andy, and he rolled to the side, nearly losing his grip, nearly tumbling into space.

The knife came up again, and Andy rolled off the compartment, back onto the arm. His hand locked on the electrical wire, stopping his fall.

He looked at the mesh cage.

He’s waiting for me, Andy thought. Waiting for me to crawl on top and then jab me with his knife.

Andy look a breath, and then scurried onto the compartment, looking down. The blade jabbed up, right at his stomach. But he arched upward, and the blade touched only air.

Andy reached down to the compartment door.

Chucky pulled the blade out, ready to try to stab Andy again.

Andy felt the handle of the compartment. He pushed it down and the compartment door popped open. And Chucky, standing on his seat, leaning against the mesh, slipped out.

But then the doll reached out and grabbed at the door. He clambered up like an insect, desperate and grunting. There was something wrong with the doll's face. It was slipping off, sliding away.

Chucky grabbed at Andy's leg. He brought his knife up and jabbed down.

Andy turned around.

And he looked at the twisted face of the doll.

I thought it was over in the apartment. We melted you. You were a melted mess.

Then I thought it was over in the factory.

We covered you with melted plastic, buried you.

But it wasn't any good.

You kept coming back.

Because you're not a doll.

You're something else.

And you have to be killed.

I have to kill you.

Andy raised the gun. Chucky jabbed his blade into Andy's leg one more time.

Andy raised the gun, and he thought: I'm not a good shot. I'm not even a passable shot.

But this I can't miss.

Chucky saw the barrel, only inches away from his head. Then it touched Chucky's head.

"You go to hell!" Andy said. He pulled the trigger. Gently squeezing, the way De Silva had showed him.

Chucky's head exploded. But the doll was still there. Andy squeezed the trigger again. And another chunk of the head went flying into space. Andy kept repeating.

You. Go. To.

Blast!

Hell.

Until there was nothing there but a headless stalk, which finally started slipping away. The doll plunged to the ground. Andy heard the doll's body land with a tremendous thud. It exploded, sending off a shower of sparks.

And then Andy lowered himself into the compartment, to Tyler.

Epilogue

There were a half dozen police cars around.

The flashing lights seemed to fit the amusement park.

Andy was handcuffed, his arms behind his back. De Silva shook her head.

"You're not going to tell them?"

Andy shook his head. He saw Tyler pouring out his incredible story to three cops, pointing at Andy, talking about Chucky.

Andy saw the cops shaking their heads.

Tyler's only a kid. What an imagination, huh?

Andy looked at De Silva. "Yeah, right. Like they'll *really* believe me."

De Silva touched his arm. "They might believe all of us."

Andy looked at her. He smiled and then shook his head. "Forget it. You don't want to get mixed up in this. Just forget it."

But De Silva smiled right back. "Too late, Barclay. I already am."

He looked at her. And he saw that she wasn't scared, that she meant it. She'll stick with me through this. And for the first time in a long time. Andy knew that he wasn't alone.

Kristin De Silva took his arm. "Let's go. Let's tell them everything."

He let her guide him over to the police officers questioning Tyler.

Thinking: I don't care if they believe me.

I don't care.

Because this time, it's really over.

Damnedest thing, the operator of the Zipper thought. That lightning bolt knocking the ride out, and then that kid, climbing up the arm and the—

Hell. What did I see?

I thought I saw the doll, outside the compartment jabbing at the kid with a knife.

The operator shrugged.

Couldn't be. Impossible. Just *couldn't* be.

But the operator walked over to the mess sitting right near the entrance to the ride.

There were wires, and gooey stuff like blood, and bits of plastic.

Doesn’t look like any doll I’ve ever seen, the guy thought.

He bent down close and fingered the stuff.

He saw wires and switches and bits of metal, but all this red goo couldn’t be blood, and bone.

Couldn’t be . . .

He fingered the pile.

Thinking: I’ll go back and get a broom and dustpan. Sweep this shit up. Maybe keep it, look at it.

You never know, he thought.

There might be something interesting here.